



Holmes of Kyoto

~A Counterfeiter's
Silent Request~

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Mai Mochizuki



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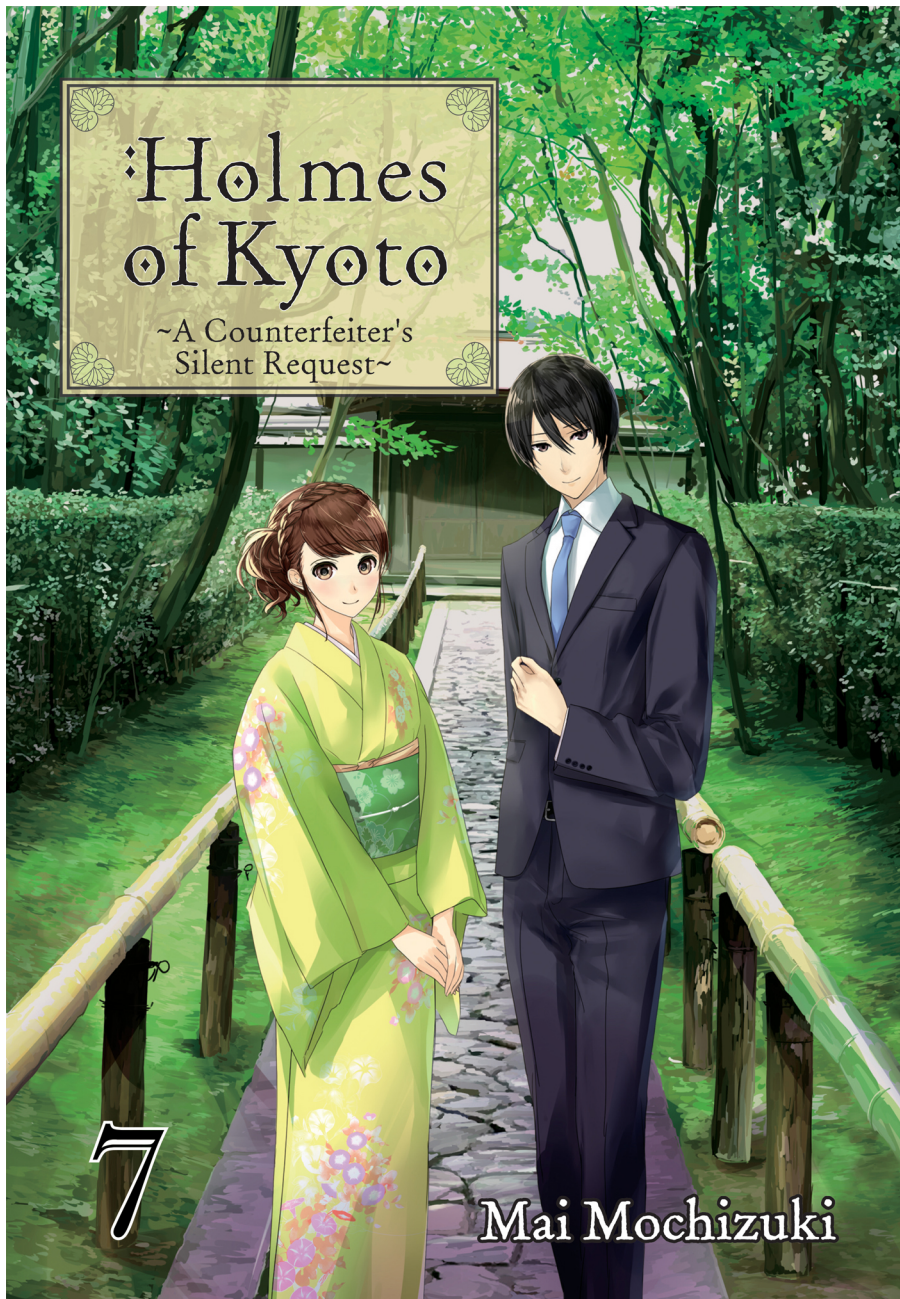
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Aoi Mashiro

She is a third-year high school student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama. In an unexpected turn of events, she winds up working part-time at Kura. Now Kiyotaka is teaching her about art and antiques.



Kiyotaka Yagashira

Age 22. He is a second-year graduate student at Kyoto University. Nicknamed “Holmes,” he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. His grandfather is the owner of Kura, an antique store in Kyoto’s Teramachi-Sanjo district. Sometimes he acts like your typical mischievous, “wicked” Kyoto boy.



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Prologue

1

Kyoto, being the world-famous tourist destination that it is, sees several tourist seasons each year. The cherry blossoms in spring, Gozan no Okuribi in summer, and the autumn foliage all bring in crowds of people, but the busiest times are New Year's, the Gion Festival, and Golden Week. Those are when you see long lines at the bus terminal in front of Kyoto Station, and the number of people walking from Shijo Street to Yasaka Shrine is twice as high as usual. Dealing with the crowds is a hassle, so I hole myself up at home during tourist season. Maybe that means I've truly become a Kyoto resident.

It was now mid-May, and Golden Week was over. The crowds were much smaller, but there were still quite a lot of tourists—probably ones who shifted their time off to not align with the Golden Week rush. At times like this, I always groaned and thought, “That’s Kyoto for you.”

I—third-year high schooler Aoi Mashiro—was marveling over the number of tourists in the shopping district as I walked from Oike Street to Teramachi Street. I soon spotted my workplace: the small antique shop, Kura. I stopped in front of it and opened the door, saying “Good morning” as the chime rang.

“Ah, good morning, Aoi,” said Kiyotaka “Holmes” Yagashira...or not. It was his father, Takeshi Yagashira, who we call Manager. They looked completely different but had the same gentle aura and voice, so I couldn’t help but be startled.

Holmes wasn’t in the store. On May 5th, two days after my birthday party, he’d gone overseas with the owner for work. The manager and I were watching the store in his stead.

I glanced at the counter where the manager was sitting. In front of him were his manuscript and crumpled-up balls of paper. He was an old-fashioned writer, so he still wrote his manuscripts by hand. Based on the state of the counter, he’d hit a block in his writing.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said, looking relieved. “I was at my limit.” He hurriedly shoved the manuscript into his bag. “I hit a block, and it’s been torture ever since. I’m going for a quick walk. Please watch the store, Aoi, and feel free to do your homework at the same time.”

“Oh, okay. I figured that was the case.”

He quickly stood up and left the shop, almost as if running away. He was the type of author who drew inspiration from walking outside, seeing things, and experiencing different settings, so staying in one place for too long gave him writer's block. It wasn't unusual for him to rush out of the store like that the moment I arrived. And since I was used to watching the store, I didn't mind being left alone.

“Okay, time to start cleaning,” I said enthusiastically to myself. I put on my apron and picked up the feather duster.

The manager gave me permission to study instead since I have entrance exams coming up, but I still have to earn my pay. Besides, with Holmes gone, the store gets slightly dirty when it's normally perfectly clean. Since I've been tasked with watching the store, I have to prevent that from happening.

As I was diligently cleaning, the door chime rang.

“Heya!” came a lighthearted voice. It was Akihito Kajiwara, an up-and-coming actor. His attractive features, light-colored hair, and carefree personality were well-received by the public. His popularity was on the rise as one of the “hottest young actors.”

He doesn't make my heart flutter, though.

We first met Akihito at a lodge in Kurama. His late father, Naotaka Kajiwara, was one of the manager's author friends, so after he passed away, their family asked Holmes for advice on the artwork he'd left behind. Before we knew it, Akihito had become a very familiar face at Kura.

“Oh, Akihito! Thank you for coming the other day.” I bowed. Akihito had attended my birthday party.

“Yep, congrats again on turning eighteen. How was your Golden Week? Did you go on a trip with Holmes to celebrate becoming legal?” he asked as he sat down at the counter. *Ever the cheeky one.*

“Ugh, don't call it that. And no, Holmes went abroad two days after the party.”

“Really? Why?”

“He's accompanying the owner, who received an appraisal request from a museum overseas. Apparently, they were also asked to buy some artwork from various places.”

“Huh, I always wondered how this shop stayed afloat with no customers. So it has other sources of income too,” Akihito said, looking around the store. He seemed impressed.

I gave an awkward smile. I wasn't going to say it, but I'd wondered the exact same thing.

“So, where's Holmes?”

“He hasn't come back yet.”

“Huh?” Akihito squeaked. “When's he coming back?”

“Who knows?”

“Wait, you don’t know? Aren’t you his girlfriend?”

Last month, I’d started dating Kiyotaka Yagashira, the appraiser-in-training known as the “Holmes of Kyoto.”

“W-Well, yes. Before he left, he said, ‘I won’t be able to contact you because of the time difference, but I’ll be back in mid-May.’”

“The owner’s working him hard, huh?” Akihito gave a sympathetic shrug.

“Actually, he was excited because Yoshie is going with them this time, meaning his domestic work is halved.”

Yoshie Takiyama was the owner’s girlfriend, a woman in her forties who ran a consulting company in the art industry. They were over thirty years apart in age, but apparently, Yoshie was into older men.

“She is?” Akihito furrowed his brow, seemingly deep in thought.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, well, I mean... Are you okay, Aoi?”

“Huh? Why do you ask?”

“Yoshie’s going on that business trip with them. What if something happens between her and Holmes?” he asked with a straight face.

I burst out laughing. “What? What gave you that idea?” Yoshie and the owner had already been dating for ten years, and Holmes saw her as an aunt. *Where did Akihito get that from?*

“I mean, Yoshie’s gorgeous, and she looks so young you wouldn’t believe she’s over forty. I’d totally go for her.”

“Yeah, but...” Yoshie *was* beautiful, and she looked like she was in her early thirties. But still, she was the owner’s girlfriend, and Holmes...had me. “Holmes isn’t unfaithful.”

“I know he isn’t. But actually... Well, to be honest, I saw something happen after your birthday party.”

“Huh?” My birthday party had been held at the Yagashira estate near Ginkaku-ji Temple. Akihito was one of the many attendees.

“You went home around 11 p.m., right? Yoneyama gave you, Kaori, and Saori a ride.”

“Yes...” I had a bad feeling. My heart was beating restlessly. Like Akihito said, Yoneyama had driven the three of us home in his car. Originally, Holmes had said he’d drive me, but Ueda and the owner made him drink alcohol during the party. Since Yoneyama was a non-drinker, he’d already been expecting to give people rides.

“I was getting ready to leave too, and I went to look for Holmes to say bye. I saw him and Yoshie alone on the balcony.”

My heart palpitations got worse.

“Yoshie was crying and clinging to Holmes, and Holmes put his

hands on her shoulders...”

I gasped, imagining the scene all too vividly.

“I couldn’t hear them that clearly, but Yoshie was saying stuff like, ‘Seeing you and Aoi made me realize how I felt’ and ‘But it would cause problems for you.’ Then Holmes said, ‘What do you mean? I don’t mind at all,’ took his handkerchief out of his pocket, and wiped her tears away. Isn’t that fishy?”

I looked down in silence. *It is fishy. And since Akihito isn’t the type of person to lie, it’s probably true. Does that mean that when Holmes and I started going out, Yoshie didn’t see him as a child anymore...and realized she had romantic feelings for him? Holmes said, “I don’t mind at all.” Does that mean he accepted her feelings? Come to think of it, I assumed the owner went overseas with them, but what if Holmes and Yoshie went by themselves? No way, that can’t be true. What am I thinking?* I shook my head.

Akihito hurriedly held up his hands to assuage me. “It’s okay, Aoi; calm down. Even if Holmes is cheating on you with Yoshie, there’s no need to be depressed. Men are faithless creatures, after all.”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, yeah. Hey, you should just cheat too. With me, for example.” He touched my cheek and peered at my face. “How about it?”

“Um...what?” *He’s never said anything like that to me before. Has he finally gone insane?* I glared at him as coldly as I could.

“You’re eighteen now, right? That means you’re in my strike zone. Congrats!” He gave me a cheerful grin.

Ugh, this guy. Still, as exasperated as I was, I could tell that he realized he’d made me sad and was trying to take my mind off what he told me. *He didn’t have to do it that way, though.* I was about to brush him away when the door chime rang.

“Hey, coming in.”

It was Ueda, one of the regulars. He was one of the manager’s close friends from university and ran several businesses in Osaka. As usual, he was looking stylish in a shiny suit and polished leather shoes. He had also attended my birthday party.

“Welcome, Ueda,” I said.

“Hey, Aoi and Akihito. Nice mood you’ve got going on here. Cheating on your man?” He looked at us with a mischievous grin.

I panicked and pushed Akihito’s hand away. “N-N-N-N-N-Not at all!”

“I’m just kidding. Where’s Takeshi? Or Holmes?” Ueda looked around the store.

“The manager went out to get some fresh air, and Holmes went overseas with the owner. They haven’t come back yet.”

“Nah, Holmes and the owner should be here soon. Anyway, I’m gonna bring the goods in. Gimme a hand.”

“Goods?” I asked, confused.

Ueda opened the door wide and said, “In here, thanks.”

Delivery workers brought several wooden and cardboard boxes inside. Soon, all of the empty space in the store was filled with boxes.

“Um, what are these, Ueda?” I asked.

“Dang, that’s a lot,” said Akihito.

“What? It’s the stuff that Holmes and the owner bought overseas,” Ueda answered nonchalantly.

“Huh? A-All of this?” I was amazed.

“Yeah, they acted as buyers—people who take requests to buy works of art.”

“Wow, that’s pretty cool,” said Akihito. “But why’re you bringing them here, Ueda?”

“I’m licensed in customs clearing,” he said, pointing a thumb at himself. “Side from management consulting, I also run a customs clearance business.” I remembered that from what I’d heard about him before. “Whenever you buy art overseas and bring it into Japan, you gotta pass through customs. That’s where we come in. Basically, I do business with Kura.” He folded his arms proudly and grinned.

“Huh, so even if you’re a licensed antiques dealer, it’s not that easy to bring art in from overseas. Looks like they really need you, Ueda,” Akihito said, impressed by the piles of boxes filling the store.

“Yep, but Kiyotaka said he’s gonna get a customs clearing license too, so my days are numbered.”

Akihito laughed. “Yeah, guess so.”

Before we knew it, the store was buried in boxes. I gaped in awe. “It’s incredible they bought so much.” Thinking about it, it was the first time I’d been present for an overseas shipment.

“Nah,” Ueda said, shaking his head. “Sometimes they fill an entire shipping container. This batch’s one of the smaller ones.”

“R-Really?”

“Anyway, I told Takeshi the stuff was coming in today, but I bet he forgot.” Ueda put his hands on his hips and sighed.

“That might be true,” I said. “I didn’t hear anything about this.” I looked at the tabletop calendar on the counter and noticed that today’s date was circled, meaning he’d at least noted it down. “This is a lot of boxes, though. Customers won’t be able to see anything.”

“Yeah, that’s why the clients are coming in today.”

“Huh?”

The door chime rang for the fifth time that day, which was almost unheard of for our quiet little store.

“Welcome!” I said, turning around. There were a few men in suits

at the door who were very clearly businessmen. They all bowed as they introduced themselves.

"I'm Yamamoto from K.B. Hotel in Kobe. Is the owner here?"

"I'm Nishikawa from O.S. Department Store in Osaka."

"I'm Sakura from N.G. Hall in Nagoya."

These were the clients that Ueda was talking about.

"U-Umm, the owner is... Um, let me call the manager." Panicking, I picked up my smartphone.

"I think the owner will be here soon, so please have a seat and wait," Ueda said, quickly stepping forward. "Aoi, can you make coffee?"

Phew. It's a good thing Ueda's here.

Relieved, I went to the kitchenette and started making coffee. The door chime rang again.

Agh, who is it this time?

I nervously peeked out from the kitchenette and blinked in surprise. It was the owner and Yoshie, with Holmes standing behind them. Holmes smiled at me, and my heart skipped a beat. I hadn't seen him in a while, and he looked more mature than usual in his casual suit. Meanwhile, the owner was wearing a stylish informal kimono as always.

"Oh!" the visitors exclaimed upon the appraisers' arrival. They crowded around him.

"Thank you for procuring what I asked for," one of them said.

"I'm here to pick up the goods," said another.

The owner grimaced. "My apprentice will take care of everything. I'm tired, so ask Kiyotaka here." He plunked himself down onto the sofa, took out his folding fan, and fanned himself.

"Well, I suppose you would be tired after all that running around and having fun." Holmes gave an exasperated shrug. "Thank you for coming here, everyone. I'll check the order list and distribute the items, so please have a seat."

He sat down behind the counter and took a folder out of his bag. Even though I hadn't seen him in a while, I was feeling too anxious to enjoy our reunion.

2

I was only a spectator, but the process that followed was overwhelming. Holmes opened the boxes, inspected the items, laid the paintings, vases, and water jugs out on the table and floor, and got the recipients' signatures. The sums on the invoices had a startling number of digits.

"Thank you for the wonderful pieces," one of the three clients

said. "I knew I was right to ask Yagashira."

"I'm going to display these in our lobby right away."

"Thank you very much."

The men bowed several times as they left the store with delivery workers carrying their purchases for them. Almost all of the boxes were gone now, as if a storm had come and passed.

"Phew," huffed Holmes. He closed the folder. "Ueda, thank you for handling this for us. Where is my father, by the way?"

"Apparently he went for a walk—forgot all this was happening today," said Ueda.

"I see. I thought we'd be able to come back earlier, but unfortunately that man was darting about everywhere." Holmes glanced at the owner. "And Aoi, Akihito, sorry for the chaos. You must've been surprised." He smiled at us. Meanwhile, the owner was sipping his coffee, feigning ignorance.

"Oh yeah, Holmes, Akihito was making a pass at Aoi," Ueda said in a joking tone, startling me. "It was about to turn into an affair."

Holmes froze.

"Wait, Holmes, he's joking." Akihito waved his hands, panicking.

Holmes smiled and said, "I know, Akidiot."

"D-Don't call me Akidiot!"

"My apologies. Right, your name was Akihito. I wonder why I made that mistake?" Holmes tilted his head with a serious expression on his face.

I almost burst out laughing.

"Now then, I'm going to take the remaining things to the second floor," Holmes said, standing up and picking up two of the cardboard boxes. "Aoi, could you take that box? It's light." He looked down at a small box on the floor.

"Oh, sure." I quickly picked up the box and followed Holmes upstairs. We usually called the second floor of Kura the "storeroom." It was an undecorated space with neat rows of shelves and boxes, a small window, and a ventilation fan.

"Please leave the box on top of the desk," Holmes said, placing his boxes against the wall.

"Okay." I placed mine on the desk.

Holmes walked up to me and said, "Your souvenir is in this box."

"You got me a souvenir? Really?" I looked up at him, elated—and our lips touched. My whole body trembled in shock.

He moved back and peered into my face. "I hear Akihito made a pass at you?" he asked, switching to his Kyoto accent.

"Huh?"

"You mustn't cheat." His sharp gaze pierced my heart.

"Wh-What?"

"I suppose I'm being selfish, though, considering I'm the one who left you alone." He awkwardly ran a hand through his hair. "Aoi... I'm sorry I couldn't spend Golden Week with you." He gently patted me on the head.

His face being so close had my heart beating a mile a minute. "I-It wasn't your fault," I said, breathless. *It was an important business trip.*

"I really am selfish. Even though I was the busy one, I'm still frustrated that I couldn't spend the holiday with you. I missed you, Aoi." He pressed his forehead against mine.

My head spun. It was taking everything I had just to stay standing. *Oh no, I love him so much.*

"Oh, I'm not sure if you'll like the souvenir, but..." Holmes reached for the box.

Now I was excited for a different reason. *What did Holmes get for me?*

"Hey, Kiyotaka!" came an angry yell from downstairs. "What did I tell you about using my store as a secret love nest?! Don't you dare!" It was the owner, and he was *really* loud.

"No one's using it as a secret love nest!" Holmes shouted back. "I'm simply giving Aoi her souvenir."

Please, stop calling it that!

"Well, you can do that downstairs! Hurry up and make the coffee! I want to drink yours," the owner yelled like a spoiled brat.

Holmes slumped his shoulders and sighed. "He's not going to stop, so let's open it downstairs. I'll make coffee."

"Okay. I haven't gotten to drink your coffee in a while either." I giggled, picked up the box again, and went downstairs. *Taking this box upstairs only to bring it back down again makes it seem like we only went upstairs to kiss...*

I blushed, suddenly extremely embarrassed.

Back on the first floor, the manager had returned from his walk and was being scolded by Ueda, while the owner, Yoshie, and Akihito were all chatting happily. *If Mieko were here, we'd have the full cast.* I smiled.

"I'm so sorry," said the manager, putting his hands on his head in remorse. "I completely forgot you were coming back today and that the shipments were arriving too. Welcome back, Owner, Yoshie, and Kiyotaka."

"Thank you," said Holmes. "I'm sorry you had to watch the store the whole time I was gone. I'll make coffee." He smiled and went to the kitchenette.

"What souvenir did Holmes getcha?" asked Ueda.

"Oh, I wanna know too!" said Akihito.

"U-Umm..." I stammered.

“You can open it, Aoi,” said Holmes from the kitchenette.

“Okay then, I will.” I anxiously opened the box. Inside were a framed lithograph and another smaller box. I picked up the frame and immediately exclaimed, “Oh, wow, it’s Mucha!”

Alphonse Maria Mucha was a renowned artist. This lithograph was the famous *Zodiac*, which depicted a woman’s profile.

“Hey, isn’t this painting, like, really expensive?” Akihito gulped.

The owner swooped in and took a look. “Oh, Mucha’s *Zodiac*. This is an offset lithograph, so it ain’t that costly.”

Akihito cocked his head. “Lithographs are prints, right?”

“Yeah,” said the owner. “This one’s pretty well done, so you might think it’s an original, but it’s an offset.”

“Yes, it is,” said Holmes, coming out of the kitchenette with a tray. “But as you said, it’s quite high quality.”

“Original? Offset? Huh?” Akihito seemed even more confused.

Holmes placed the cups on the counter as he began explaining, “An original lithograph is created by the artist themselves, while an offset lithograph is created mechanically. This is an offset lithograph, but it approaches the quality of an original, so I’d love for Aoi to have it.”

“Thank you,” I said. I’d always loved Mucha, so this was wonderful. Plus, it was a relief to hear that it wasn’t too expensive. *The prices they deal with here are all way out of my league.*

“Huh... Are offsets cheap?” Akihito asked.

“Yeah, this one only would’ve been about a hundred thousand yen,” the owner said nonchalantly.

I choked. *I-Is a hundred thousand yen supposed to be a bargain? That’s way too expensive.*

“What’s in the box, Aoi?” asked Ueda. “Is it a ring?”

“Nah, giving her a ring at this stage would just be off-putting,” said Akihito.

A-A ring? That would be a surprise, but I wouldn’t be put off. I’d be really happy.

I excitedly opened the small box. Inside was a bracelet, white as porcelain. There was a circular piece in the middle with an edelweiss emblem on it. “A bracelet!” It was an antique bracelet with a European feel.

“No, it’s a bracelet watch,” Holmes said. “I bought it when we stopped by Switzerland.”

I opened the centerpiece, revealing a clock face. “Th-This is really nice!”

“I’m glad you like it. I don’t know what high school girls are into these days, but this has an antique aesthetic, so I thought it’d make a nice accessory regardless of current trends.”

“Thank you so much. I’ll take good care of it.” I hugged the small box to my chest.

Holmes smiled gently, while everyone else had defeated looks on their faces.

After some time, the owner declared, “This couple’s annoying me, so I’m going to the Hanamachi for some rest and relaxation!” and dragged Ueda and Akihito out of the store with him. The manager went to a nearby cafe, wanting to focus on his manuscript. Only Holmes, Yoshie, and I were left in the shop.

I placed everyone’s cups on the tray, took them to the kitchenette, and immediately set to work washing them. My heart was still pounding with joy from the souvenirs.

Inside the store, Holmes and Yoshie looked like they were having a pleasant conversation, but nothing about it bothered me. *Akihito said that stuff about them, but he must’ve misunderstood somehow.* I hummed as I washed the dishes. When I was finished, I turned off the faucet with a *squeak*, dried my hands with a towel, and quietly left the kitchenette.

“Oh, right, Kiyotaka. I forgot to mention this, but don’t tell anyone what happened that day. It was an impulsive mistake,” Yoshie said, holding her index finger in front of her mouth.

“Don’t say that,” Holmes said. “I was happy to hear it.”

Yoshie looked at him for a moment before murmuring, “Thanks,” blushing, and looking down.

The unusual atmosphere between them made me freeze in front of the kitchenette, unable to say anything.

3

The next day at school, I absentmindedly opened my atlas during geography class. Seeing the map of Europe made me remember Holmes and Yoshie. I shook my head lightly.

In the end, I couldn’t ask them anything.

I sighed, feeling increasingly anxious, then rested my chin on my hand.

If I was going to feel this conflicted, I should’ve just asked Holmes. I’m sure I’m worrying over nothing. Besides, Yoshie is the owner’s girlfriend. There’s no way she’d have an affair with his grandson...

Their faces flickered through my mind again, and I groaned.

Is school almost over? I looked at the clock on the wall. I wasn’t wearing the Swiss bracelet watch that Holmes gave me. It felt more like a fashion accessory, and I didn’t want to get any scratches on it.

The teacher happened to start talking about Switzerland, bringing

my attention back to the lesson. “Area-wise, Switzerland is about as large as the island of Kyushu, but what’s notable is that it has an altitude range of 4,441 meters. This gives each of its seasons a unique beauty. Also, Switzerland’s national flower is the edelweiss.”

I remembered the edelweiss in the middle of the bracelet watch and leaned forward a little bit.

“Edelweiss is the subject of many famous songs too. During World War II, German troops stationed in the mountains sang a song about edelweiss. Also, in the language of flowers, edelweiss symbolizes nobility, patience, and precious memories, but I digress. Please turn to the next page in your textbooks.”

I listened to the smiling teacher and turned the page. *Maybe that’s why the watch has an edelweiss on it—because it symbolizes “precious memories.” I should do more research on Mucha too.*

During lunch break, I went straight to the library after I finished eating. I found a book about art history and sat down with it in the corner. It contained a lot of information about Alphonse Maria Mucha, an artist who was still supported to this day.

Mucha was born in Moravia in the Austrian Empire, which is now part of the Czech Republic. He was active as an artist from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century. When he was in his twenties, he left his homeland and went to an art academy in Munich. After that he moved to Paris and—after much hardship—eventually achieved great success there. The tipping point was a poster he made in 1895 for Sarah Bernhardt, an actress. It was for the play *Gismonda*. The dignity portrayed and the elaborate detail of her clothing were well-received in Paris at the time, securing his position as an ambassador of art nouveau overnight.

The next page had a picture of *Gismonda*. In it, a woman stood majestically, holding a palm branch in her right hand.

“Oh, I’ve seen this before,” I murmured. *So this was the work of art that brought Mucha instant fame.*

The piece that Holmes had given me, *Zodiac*, was considered Mucha’s most famous work. According to the book, it was originally a calendar for an art publishing company called Champenois that printed lithographs. La Plume, an art publisher that was on close terms with Champenois, bought the rights and distributed it as their magazine’s calendar, further spreading Mucha’s name and bringing success to both companies.

Mucha left behind a famous quote: “The purpose of my work was never to destroy but always to create.” *Those are great words.* I smiled.

The book also said: *After becoming an ambassador of art nouveau in Paris, Mucha returned to his homeland, where people were envious of his*

foreign success. Czechoslovakia had just declared independence from the Austrian Empire. Despite the harsh treatment he received, he designed numerous banknotes, stamps, and crests for the country, all free of charge. "Creation instead of destruction"—these words may represent Mucha's devoted, positive spirit.

"Wow..."

Mucha had expected to make a triumphant return to his motherland but had instead ended up in an uncomfortable situation where everyone was jealous of him. Nevertheless, he designed banknotes and stamps for free, wanting to help his newly independent home country.

What an amazing person. Creation instead of destruction, because art exists to bring people happiness... Holmes often says that you can see an artist in their work, and that really might be true. I feel like Mucha's art has the power to heal people's hearts.

As I nodded to myself, I heard a whisper from the other side of the bookshelf.

"Huh? What do you mean your boyfriend lied to you?"

I frowned. Apparently, someone was getting relationship advice in this corner of the library.

"Your boyfriend is that university student, right?" they continued.

"Yeah. He said he's been living in Umeda all this time, but when I say I want to visit, he deflects and doesn't let me come over. And then the other day, I was visiting relatives in Nagaokakyo, and I saw him going into an apartment with a girl. There were two surnames on the nameplate."

"Wait, huh? What do you mean?"

"He was living with an older woman..."

"What the hell? Really?"

"I thought it was weird how he was always changing the subject." The girl sniffed. "He was two-timing all along."

"That makes me so mad. Do university students think high school girls are easy to trick or something?"

Their conversation was making my head spin. *Holmes isn't that kind of person.* Despite believing that, the unease wouldn't go away. My heart was pounding unpleasantly.

I...should stop agonizing over this. All I have to do is ask him. I nodded firmly and shut the book.

4

After class, I impatiently pedaled my bike towards Kura. When I arrived at Teramachi Street's shopping arcade, I parked my bike more carelessly than usual, in a rush to clear up my uneasy feelings. The

moment I saw the antique signboard, my pulse quickened. I stood in front of the door, took a deep breath, and opened it.

“Good morning,” I said softly.

“Good morning, Aoi,” said Holmes, who was sitting in front of the counter with the accounting book. He smiled with the grace of blooming flowers, blowing away the gloom that had been hanging over me. I sighed in relief—but then I heard footsteps coming down the stairs. It was Yoshie.

“Hello, Aoi,” she greeted me with a gentle smile.

It’s strange for Yoshie to be here at this time of day. What’s going on?

I hated myself for panicking over such a small thing.

“Oh right, Kiyotaka,” Yoshie said, “I forgot to give you this. These are the documents you wanted. Can you check them?” She handed him a brown envelope.

“Thank you,” Holmes said. “I had something I wanted to give you too.” He opened the drawer and gave her a different brown envelope.

“Oh my, what’s this?” Yoshie took out what was inside.

Without thinking, I craned my neck to see what it was—a well-known marriage magazine. I could even see the words “Comes with marriage registration form!” on it. I gasped and looked at Yoshie, who was now clutching the envelope to her chest, her ears bright red.

“D-Don’t be silly, Kiyotaka. I don’t need this. You really are absurd,” she said in a happy and embarrassed tone. She then left as if running away.

After the door chime quieted, the store was engulfed in silence.

“What was that envelope?” I asked.

“Ah, Yoshie has a first-class architect license,” Holmes said. “She created a renovation plan for this store. We’re thinking of turning it into a hybrid cafe and antique shop one day. Not right away, though.”

He smiled cheerfully, taking the papers out of the envelope. As he’d said, they depicted floor plans.

Normally, I would’ve been enthusiastic about the idea. My eyes would’ve lit up, and I’d have said, “That’s what you’re planning? This store would make a lovely cafe!” But instead, my mind was occupied by the marriage magazine and registration form that he’d given Yoshie.

“Holmes...are you and Yoshie getting married?” I murmured.

“Huh?” Holmes looked bewildered. “Me and...Yoshie? Getting...married?” He must’ve been extremely surprised because his words came out like a foreigner who wasn’t used to speaking Japanese.

Don’t tell me... He didn’t think that I’d see what he gave Yoshie? Why would he give her that in front of me in the first place?

“And with those blueprints she made, you’re going to renovate

this place and open an antique cafe together?" I continued.

"No, um... Aoi, what on earth are you talking about?" He stood up, looking confused.

"Akihito told me that on the night of my birthday party, you hugged Yoshie and she said some suggestive things while crying. There seemed to be something between you yesterday too. Now that I think about it, neither of you is married so it's not an affair or anything, right? So maybe I'm not allowed to blame you. But if that's how it is, then going out with me and not telling the owner either is too insincere. If you really love Yoshie, to the point where you'd give her a marriage magazine with a registration form, then you have to do things properly! If...if you do it like this, no one will give you their blessing!"

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I rambled incoherently. Even I didn't know what I was saying. Was I frustrated? Angry? Sad? All I knew was that the pain in my chest was unbearable.

Holmes stood there, dumbfounded. "No, um..." He held up his hand. "Please listen to me, Aoi. Getting straight to the point, Yoshie and I are not getting married. I don't have any romantic feelings for her in the first place, nor have I ever considered it. She's been my grandfather's girlfriend ever since I was in elementary school. To me, she's a mother figure," he said quickly, trying to calm me down.

"You're not lying, right?" My face was streaked with tears.

"I'm not." He nodded. "Though I do have guilty feelings about you, I haven't *done* anything to make me guilty."

"G-Guilty feelings?" My tears instantly stopped, and I blushed. My fears and disappointment had all disappeared. *It's times like this when I realize how good Holmes is at manipulating people's emotions.*

"As for Yoshie..."

The door chime suddenly rang. The owner barged into the store and asked, "Is Yoshie here?" Then he looked at Holmes and me, and his eyes widened. "What, a lovers' spat?"

I gasped. My tears had stopped, but it must've been obvious from a glance that I'd been crying. I looked down, embarrassed.

"Kiyotaka, if you give a lady gifts with such a mushy message of love in them and she still gets mad at you, that means you have a long way to go when it comes to women." The owner grinned, looking genuinely pleased.

Holmes shrugged. "Could you refrain from reading into people's gifts?"

Messages of love? Does that mean the souvenirs he gave me had special meanings behind them? I hadn't expected that, so I didn't know what to say.

"Anyway, is Yoshie here?" The owner looked around the store.

“Your girlfriend hurried out a few minutes ago,” Holmes said.

“Oh, must’ve gone to the museum, then.” The owner put his hat back on and left. The store fell silent again.

Holmes sighed. “Aoi, please have a seat. I’ll explain everything.”

“O-Okay.” I sat in front of the counter as instructed. Holmes sat down across from me.

“As Akihito said, after your birthday party, Yoshie and I were on the balcony. I went there because I saw her crying.”

I waited for him to continue.

“I asked her what was wrong, and she said, crying all the while, ‘I never thought about remarrying before. I didn’t want to either, but seeing you and Aoi in your fresh, new relationship made me realize how I felt. Deep in my heart, I wanted to get married again. I want to marry Seiji. But it would cause problems for you, right? People already think I’m going after the inheritance.’”

That came as a bit of a surprise.

“So then I said, ‘I don’t mind at all. I think it’s a happy thing.’ I’m glad there’s someone out there who’d want to marry that old man.”

I nodded, understanding how he felt. “But if Yoshie and the owner get married, won’t others really think she’s going after the inheritance?”

“It may seem that way at a glance, but Yoshie is a businesswoman, and her business is successful. She also owns a house in Arashiyama. She might even be wealthier than my grandfather, since his assets mainly consist of antiques. Either way, what matters most is how they feel.”

“You’re right.” *Regardless of what other people think, what matters is what she and the owner want to do.*

“However, Yoshie was apparently quite drunk at the time. Yesterday, she said, ‘Don’t tell anyone what happened that day. It was an impulsive mistake.’ I was going to pretend it didn’t happen, but I’m sure she was telling the truth that day, and to be honest, I’d feel more reassured if the two of them got married. So in order to encourage those feelings, I gave her that magazine.”

“Oh...” I covered my mouth with my hand. *So that’s what it was.* I slumped back in the chair.

“Does that clear up the misunderstanding?” he asked.

“Y-Yes.” I felt like I was going to cry again, so I quickly changed the subject. “So, um, was the owner right about the message in your souvenirs?”

Holmes looked away, seemingly troubled. “You...figured out the message in that tea bowl Izumi left here, so I thought you’d notice this time too.”

“Huh?” Apparently there really *was* a message. I thought about

what he'd given me: Mucha's Zodiac lithograph and a bracelet watch. Mucha was a Czech artist, and his motto was "creation instead of destruction." Zodiac was originally designed as a calendar. The bracelet watch had an edelweiss design. In the language of flowers, edelweiss symbolizes nobility, patience, and precious memories. A calendar, a clock, nobility, patience, precious memories...

Oh, I see. "In the days, months, and years to come, things might happen, but let's pass the time together and create precious memories." Holmes gave me those souvenirs to convey that message. The moment I realized that, it felt like I'd been splashed with water. I shivered, and at the same time, I teared up.

"I figured out your message," I said quietly.

Holmes smiled happily.

I can't believe I didn't notice—and I even doubted him. I'm a bit ashamed. But... "Um, can you tell me the right answer, though?" I wanted to hear it from his own mouth.

"Yes, of course... To summarize, it's along the lines of, 'I look forward to our continued relationship.'" He smiled and placed a hand on his chest.

My heart skipped a beat. "S-Same, if you'll have me." I quickly bowed.

Holmes chuckled. "You suspected my relationship with Yoshie, though?"

I flinched. "No, um...sorry. Are you angry?"

"I'm not angry. Based on what you saw and heard, I think it's natural that you misunderstood."

I shrank back, embarrassed.

"Besides, I feel sorry for neglecting you. Even though it was our first Golden Week as a couple, I went overseas."

"Oh, no, don't say that. You didn't have a choice. You went overseas for training and work." *I felt lonely, but I didn't feel dissatisfied.*

"Thank you for understanding. It really is troublesome when you love someone, though." He smiled wryly.

"Troublesome?" I looked up at him, confused.

"Yes. When I previously visited other countries, I was so excited about seeing different works of art that I lost track of time. But now that I have someone I love, I'm hopeless. Every time I see something rare, eat something delicious, or encounter something that moves my heart, I think about you. 'If Aoi were here, what expression would she make? What would she say?' I was so desperate to come back home."

Oh... My chest tightened to the point where it hurt.

"Aoi, I missed you much more than you think," he said, looking me in the eye.

"Holmes..." It was getting hard to breathe.

“And yet, when I returned, you were flirting with Akihito, questioning me about marrying Yoshie, and accusing me of being insincere.”

“Y-You *are* angry, aren’t you?!”

“I’m kidding,” he said with his usual unfair smile.

I slumped my shoulders. *This wicked Kyoto guy got me again.*

“Though I must ask, were you really going to break up with me?”

His voice got quieter towards the end of his question.

“Y-Yes. What other choice would I have?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you liked me but said ‘Let’s break up’ because of some other circumstance, I might’ve said ‘I don’t want to.’ But in this case, if you fell in love with someone else to the point of wanting to marry them, there wouldn’t be anything I could say to change that, right? Saying ‘I don’t want to’ wouldn’t do anything. But of course, I’d still be shocked, frustrated, and hurt.”

I’ve experienced it before, so I know there’s nothing you can do about people’s hearts. I laughed weakly.

Holmes brought his hand to his mouth. “You’re strong, Aoi.”

“No, not at all.”

“The thought of something happening and taking you away from me made me scared.”

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing. We could use a change of mood, so I’ll make coffee. After our break, there’s a lot of work I want to ask you to do.” He went to the kitchenette.

“Okay, I’ll try to do a good job!” I shouted enthusiastically.

“You don’t need to be so eager. Anyway, take a seat first.”

I sat back down on the chair. *These past two days were a roller coaster of emotions, but now I just want to drink Holmes’s delicious coffee.*

Thus began the summer. After this incident, something drastic would happen to us, and before long I’d be reminiscing sadly about these carefree conversations...but that’s a story for a little later.

Chapter 1: The Heart of the Matter

1

The humid month of June ended, and now it was July. The rainy season hadn't been declared over yet, but it felt like the sun was coming out more often. *Kyoto is relatively calm at this time of year.*

"It's hard to believe it was so crowded in May," I murmured, sitting at the counter with my textbooks and notes.

It was finally time to start putting real effort into studying for entrance exams. I was at Kura for tutoring, not work, but when they needed me to watch the shop, I stopped studying and assumed my role as a store employee.

"Indeed," said Holmes. He was sitting across from me, doing the accounting. "It's nice to relax, but as a business, it's quite unfortunate."

"More customers come in during tourist season, but most of them just look around without buying anything, don't they?" *Does Holmes not mind that?*

"Well, I don't expect much in the way of sales to begin with. The kind of customer who comes in on a whim isn't going to buy antiques that cost tens or hundreds of thousands of yen."

"Really?"

"Yes. My hope is that they will come in, see the antiques, and develop an interest in old works of art. So I'm happy to get a lot of visitors even if they don't buy anything."

"That's why you offer them coffee?" *And that's why he wanted to turn this place into a hybrid cafe and antique store.* I nodded in understanding. *He doesn't mind if customers don't buy anything. If they see the things here and come to like them, it'll contribute to the antiques industry one day.* I found his focus on the future commendable.

"And then one day, they'll be a big spender at our store," Holmes said, smiling and placing his hand on his chest.

I didn't know what to say. *Yep, that's Holmes for you.*

"Anyway, it won't be busy again until summer break, right?" I asked.

"The Gion Festival is before then."

"Oh yeah, it's almost time for the Gion Festival." I sighed deeply. The festival was a memorable event for me. I blushed, remembering how Holmes had gallantly swooped in and saved me from that nerve-

racking situation.

“Yes, and speaking of summer break, I won’t be going overseas this year,” he said cheerfully.

I looked up at him, surprised. Holmes usually went overseas with the owner whenever there was a long break. They received appraisal requests from foreign museums and took purchase requests from nearby hotels and establishments.

“Are there no requests this time?” I asked.

“There are, but I’m finishing grad school next spring, so I want to focus on university this summer.”

“Oh right, you’re in your second year now.” *I’m not the only one graduating next spring.* Considering how much time he spent tending to the store, I’d secretly been worried about whether he had enough credits. *But it looks like he worked out how to balance both university and the family business.*

“So this summer, Yoshie will be accompanying the owner instead,” he said.

“Oh...” *I feel like I know why Holmes wants the owner and Yoshie to get married now. Maybe he doesn’t feel bad for Yoshie at times like this.*

The door chime rang, and in came Rikyu. He was looking rather glum.

“Hello, Rikyu,” I greeted him.

“Hi.” He stumbled over to the counter and slumped down onto a chair.

“Is something wrong, Rikyu?” Holmes asked, peering into the boy’s face.

Rikyu heaved a sigh and said, “Kiyo, you know how I asked you to come to Tokyo with me to visit my dad?”

Rikyu’s father—in other words, Yoshie’s former husband, Sakyo—lived in Tokyo and wanted Rikyu to visit him. Rikyu had asked Holmes to accompany him as his reward for helping us solve Komatsu’s case.

Holmes smiled and nodded. “Yes, I remember. You said it could be during summer break, right?”

“You don’t need to anymore,” Rikyu said weakly. He sighed again.

“Did something happen to Sakyo?”

“Yeah, he’s not in Tokyo anymore.”

“Huh?” I blurted out. From what I remembered, Sakyo was a not-particularly-successful retail investor.

Did he go bankrupt and disappear? It wasn’t the most courteous thought, but considering how frivolous he was, it wasn’t impossible. I started to worry.

The door chime rang again.

“Hey, everyone at Kura! Long time no see!”

It was a middle-aged man wearing a suit. He had light brown hair, a stylish beard, chiseled features, and a grin plastered onto his face. He radiated an Italianesque aura and was handsome enough to be a movie star.

Speak of the devil—it's Sakyo.

"My dad moved to Kyoto," Rikyu said with a distant look in his eyes.

"Welcome, Sakyo," said Holmes. "It's been quite a while. Please have a seat." He gestured towards a chair.

"Thanks, Kiyotaka," Sakyo said, sitting down. "Oh, hello there, Aoi. You've gotten a lot prettier since I last saw you."

"When did you come to Kyoto, Sakyo?" Holmes asked as he went to the kitchenette, probably to make coffee.

Rikyu answered instead. "It was literally just the other day. Apparently, Uncle Kazuhiko was a tiny bit involved with Unbound, and the police questioned him. But in the end, he was only involved with the art side and none of the bad stuff."

I placed my hand on my chest, relieved. It was recently discovered that a group of modern artists had formed a cannabis club called Unbound, which had evolved into a cult. I was worried that Rikyu's uncle might've been one of them.

"Well, Uncle Kazuhiko's a scaredy-cat, so I wasn't afraid of that. Grandpa was really shocked, though, and disowned him."

"Poor guy," Sakyo said. "All he did was make the wrong friends." He shrugged.

"The only other one around is Uncle Tsukasa, and you know how he is," Rikyu continued, resting his chin on his hand. "Uncle Kazuhiko was supposed to be the normal one, but now he's been disowned. I guess grandpa was worried enough to call dad over." He glanced at Sakyo.

"I'm happy to be able to live near my son," the older man said, hugging Rikyu and nuzzling him with his cheek.

"Stop that," Rikyu said, pushing his father's face away. He seemed genuinely displeased. "I can't stand how you're like this. It was better when you were all the way in Tokyo."

"Aw, don't be like that. I'm so glad that I'm one step closer to my dream."

"Your dream of not having to work?"

"That's more of a hope than a dream. Dreams should be more picturesque." He grinned, showing off his pearly white teeth.

Interested, I leaned forward slightly and asked, "What's your dream?"

He placed a hand on his chest, eyes sparkling. "To remarry Yoshie and live with her and Rikyu."

His son slumped his shoulders, exasperated. "There you go again. Mom's in love with the owner."

"But he's really old, right?"

Rikyu stood up and slammed his hands on the counter. "So what? He treats me a lot better than you, considering you were never even around! Besides, mom *likes* old men. Don't get the wrong idea just because you're popular with young women! I think of the owner as another father, and that's that!"

Sakyo's eyes widened. It was rare to see an emotional outburst from Rikyu. "S-Sorry. I didn't mean it that way, really."

"What *did* you mean, then? Thanks to the owner, I got to meet Kiyo. I won't let you bad-mouth him."

"No, I didn't mean it as an insult. Well, whatever. I'll put my dream on hold for now. You're a great kid, Rikyu. You really respect people's honor." Sakyo smiled gently and patted Rikyu on the head.

"Stop that." Rikyu still seemed angry.

Holmes returned from the kitchenette with a tray. "I see you haven't changed, Sakyo. Here's a cup of coffee for you." He placed several cups in front of us.

"Thanks, Kiyotaka. I missed the taste of your coffee." Sakyo sipped the drink and smiled with delight.

Holmes smiled back and sat down across from us. "So, Sakyo, are you living in that mansion in Takagamine now?"

"Yeah. Well, not exactly, but yeah."

I tilted my head. "What does that mean?"

"I'm living in a detached room on the property."

"Oh, I see." Holmes and I nodded.

"My younger brother, Tsukasa, got all mad and declared that he was going to live with dad too. He got in—it's still a detached room on the first floor, but unlike mine, there's a corridor connecting it to the main house."

"I see."

Sakyo's father—in other words, Rikyu's grandfather—was a wealthy man named Ukon Saito who had built a mansion in Takagamine, Kita-ku. After his beloved wife had passed away, he had three sons with three different women through artificial insemination. The oldest son was Sakyo, a retail investor. The second son was Tsukasa, who had his own business. The third son was Kazuhiko, an accountant. Since they all came from different mothers, they had completely different appearances and characteristics. Ukon had tried to select a successor without regard to birth order, but that idea was on hold for the time being.

The third son has been disowned, and the eldest son was summoned to the mansion. I can see why the second son would panic.

“How has life in Kyoto been?” Holmes asked. “Is it boring compared to Tokyo?”

“I thought I’d be bored, but there’s nature everywhere, the stars are beautiful, and there are a lot of atmospheric shops. It’s been a healing experience. The morning glories in the Saito estate’s garden are in bloom right now, and they’re absolutely gorgeous.” Sakyo took his phone out of his inner pocket and showed us a picture of bluish-purple flowers surrounding the hybrid Japanese-Western-style residence.

“Wow, there are so many of them!” I exclaimed. “They’re beautiful.”

“Right? I thought I was pretty used to seeing morning glories, but I never thought they were this beautiful until now.” Sakyo smiled happily.

“By the way, Sakyo, did you not come here to speak with me about something?” Holmes asked, tilting his head.

“Oh right.” Sakyo looked up. “Dad said, ‘We’re having a tea ceremony, and Kiyotaka and Aoi are invited.’”

“Aoi and I?”

“Oh, I’m invited too, Kiyo,” Rikyu added immediately.

“A tea ceremony held by Ukon?” I murmured. “Now I’m nervous.” I’d never been invited to one before, so I was afraid of making a careless mistake.

Sakyo shook his head. “He wants Tsukasa and I to each do our own. Knowing him, I bet he wants Kiyotaka to judge who does it better.”

Holmes nodded and stroked his chin.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Sakyo added. “But it’d be nice if you came.”

Holmes grinned and said, “I’m very interested in a tea ceremony competition, so I’d love to attend. Aoi, if it’s convenient for you...” He shot me a glance.

“Oh, yes. If you deem me worthy of attending, I’d love to.” I nodded stiffly.

“Glad to hear it,” Sakyo said. “I’ll let you know when we have a date. And I hope you’ll accept me as a fellow Kyoto resident from now on.” He bowed deeply.

“Of course.” We bowed back.

“Being humble’s the only thing he has going for him,” Rikyu muttered, resting his chin in his hand.

“What school of tea ceremony will it be, by the way?” Holmes asked, picking up his coffee.

Sakyo blinked. “School? Uh, I don’t really know about that stuff.” He waved his hands.

“Have you attended one of your father’s tea ceremonies before?”

“Yeah. I think it was a family-only thing, though. I drank without knowing anything about the school.” Sakyo brought his hand to his head and gave an embarrassed laugh.

“Was the matcha very foamy or not so much?” Holmes asked.

“It was. Actually, I had the impression that matcha was *supposed* to be foamy.”

I nodded—matcha was foamy in my mind too.

“In that case, it’s likely the Urasenke school,” Holmes said, folding his arms.

“Does the Urasenke school have foamy matcha?” I asked, unconsciously leaning in.

“There are many schools of tea ceremonies, but the best known is the Senke family, which is divided into three main houses: Omotesenke, Urasenke, and Mushakojisenke,” Holmes explained, holding up three fingers.

“Ooh...” Sakyo and I murmured.

“These three houses derive from Sen no Rikyu’s style of tea ceremony. His grandson, Sen no Sotan, assigned each of them to one of his own sons. Sen no Sotan had four sons: the eldest was named Kando, the second was Soshu Ichio, who inherited Mushakojisenke, the third was Sosa Koshin, who inherited Omotesenke, and the fourth was Soshitsu Senso, who inherited Urasenke. Each of the houses took on a generational structure, and the system as a whole grew large in scale.” Holmes stood up and went to the kitchenette, presumably to start preparing tea.

“I’ll help you, Holmes.” I was about to stand up, but Rikyu stood first, as if to stop me.

“It’s fine, Aoi,” Rikyu said. “I’m better than you at making tea. Kiyo, I’ll help you.” He went into the kitchenette.

Before long, eight tea bowls were on the counter—two per person. One of the two was very foamy, while the other had hardly any foam at all, as if it were deep-colored leaf tea rather than powdered tea.

“The foamy one is Urasenke, and the non-foamy one is Omotesenke,” Holmes said, sitting down. “The basic etiquette is to pick up the tea bowl with your right hand, place it on your left hand, lift it with both hands, and give a light bow. The host will generally place the tea bowl in a way where the most impressive part of the design faces the guest. Thus, to avoid using the front of the tea bowl, you rotate it twice clockwise before drinking.” He turned the tea bowl clockwise and drank.

I used to secretly wonder why turning the cup was necessary, but upon learning the reason, I was impressed.

“The last person finishes the rest, as if trying to suck up all of the

remaining powder. They cleanse the rim with their right hand, and then they cleanse their right hand with a small napkin called a *kaishi*.” He showed us what looked like notepad paper. “The word *kaishi* means ‘paper carried inside the kimono.’ Back when kimono were commonly worn, people would carry these around in everyday life. They were an indispensable tool that served the purpose of modern-day tissues, handkerchiefs, and notepads.” He put down the *kaishi*. “Lastly, the tea bowl is turned twice counterclockwise to return it to its original orientation and placed outside the edge of the tatami mat with the right hand.” He gently put the tea bowl down with his right hand.

We sighed deeply, enthralled by his elegant movements.

“Shall we give it a try?” Holmes asked. “It’s a shame that we don’t have any sweets. In a real tea ceremony, sweets are eaten before drinking.”

“Oh!” Sakyo exclaimed. “I just remembered, I brought sweets as a gift for you. They’re *minazuki*.”

Minazuki are a traditional Kyoto dessert eaten in June, consisting of white rice jelly topped with sweet azuki beans and cut into triangles. In Kyoto, there’s a Shinto ritual called “Nagoshi no Harae,” meaning “purification of summer’s passing.” It’s held on June 30th, the halfway point of the year, to cleanse the sins and impurities from the first half of the year and pray for sound health in the second. *Minazuki* are eaten during that ritual. Azuki beans symbolize exorcising evil spirits, so the sweets are also used to ward off evil.

“Ah, that works. Let’s have those.” Holmes happily accepted the box of *minazuki* and laid them out in front of each of us with the matcha.

We followed his lead, picking up the tea bowls.

“Man, I can’t help but feel awkward doing this,” said Sakyo with a hearty laugh.

Rikyu glared at him coldly. “Are you sure you can host a tea ceremony like that?”

“Nah, dad’s going to be the host.”

“Huh? Aren’t you and Uncle Tsukasa going to be holding tea ceremonies?”

“Oh, I must’ve explained it wrong. Sorry.” Sakyo hit himself on the forehead. “Dad wants to hold a tea ceremony, and he’s thinking of having us set up the tea rooms. We’ll handle the arrangements, and whoever’s is better will be used. I think he wants Kiyotaka to help with the judging.”

“I see,” said Holmes. “That makes sense. In that case, it’s not a formal ceremony, right?”

“Well, it’s just going to be us, but he does seem to want to give

you a proper experience in the chosen tea room. Oh right, he said to tell you that since it's not a real tea ceremony, you don't have to worry about being polite. He also said something about not visiting the kitchen, but I have no idea what that means." Sakyō tilted his head.

"In the context of tea ceremonies, 'visiting the kitchen' refers to bringing gifts for the people working in the kitchen," Holmes explained. "In an informal situation, people might even say, 'What should I get for the kitchen?'"

"Ohhh..." Sakyō and I said.

"You didn't know that?" Rikyū shrugged.

"There's a lot to learn about tea ceremonies, huh?" I looked down at my bowl and sighed. *Is it okay for me to attend a fancy tea ceremony when I don't even know the basic phrases?*

"There's no need to overthink it," Holmes said with a smile. "As long as you enjoy the experience, that's good enough. And as Sakyō said, it doesn't seem like it's going to be a formal ceremony. I think it'll be a wonderful opportunity to experience the atmosphere without the usual stiffness."

"Okay," I replied, feeling slightly relieved.

"That's a huge relief," Sakyō murmured.

We chuckled at his honesty.

2

"So, we're going to a preliminary tea ceremony," I said. It was break time at school, and I'd been explaining what had happened to my friend, Kaori Miyashita.

Kaori giggled and held her closed hand in front of her mouth. "A preliminary tea ceremony? I've never heard of that."

"Yeah, I made it up. Are you experienced with tea ceremonies?" Kaori was from a long-running kimono fabric shop, so she was surely familiar with the process.

"I wouldn't say I'm experienced. My sister's the heir, so she often went to them with mom, but I stayed away from that stuff."

"You've been to them before, though, right?"

"Maybe twice or thrice. I don't like that kind of setting."

"I think I know what you mean. What did you wear? A kimono?"

"Yeah, a *homongi*. We run a kimono fabric store, after all."

Homongi is one of the more formal types of kimono, typically worn to parties and special outings.

"Oh right. I wonder what I should wear?" I sighed and rested my chin on my hand. *Would an elegant dress be okay instead of a kimono?*

"Are you going in Western-style clothes?"

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

“Make sure you don’t forget to wear white socks,” Kaori said immediately.

I nodded. *I’ve heard that white socks are mandatory for tea ceremonies. But now that I think about it...* I frowned. “I was thinking of going in an elegant dress.”

“Oh, make sure it’s long enough to cover your knees. You can’t let them show.”

“Of course. And I can’t wear metallic accessories, heels, boots, or sandals, right? Oh, and I should tie my hair in a bun.” That was what my research told me.

Kaori smiled wryly and said, “You can’t wear any accessories, metallic or not.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yep. For example, a necklace could scratch the tea bowl. These ceremonies are for admiring the tea bowls and enjoying the tea, not competing over fashion.”

“Oh, I see.” That made a lot of sense. “So, back to the dress—I should wear skin-colored tights, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do I still need white socks in that case? Wouldn’t it be kind of weird to wear white socks over tights?” I asked with a serious face.

Kaori burst out laughing. *I guess it was a really stupid question.*

“Now that you mention it, it is weird. But you gotta wear them. Tights are considered bare feet, so you have to wear white socks over them.”

“Oh!” *But won’t I look pretty silly if I wear an elegant long dress with skin-colored tights and white socks?*

Still giggling, Kaori answered my thought. “Just wear a kimono. The owner and his girlfriend gave you a really nice *homongi*, right?”

“Yeah, and my grandma has a lot of them too. But it’s not a formal tea ceremony, so I don’t know if a kimono would be overkill.”

“Even if it’s not formal, you said the Saito family lives in a huge mansion. They’ll like it if you dress up.”

“R-Really?”

“Plus, Holmes might fall under your spell.” Kaori grinned and peered into my face.

I blushed. “I don’t even know how to move properly in a kimono. I feel like I’ll mess up everything if I wear one to a tea ceremony.”

“You’ll just have to get used to it before the ceremony, then.”

“Huh?”

“Wearing a kimono is something you have to get used to,” she declared, holding up her index finger. “When you get home, spend the rest of the day in a kimono. That’s the best thing you can do.”

“Uh...”

“And since wearing a kimono makes you more tense, it’s surprisingly good for studying.”

“R-Really?”

“Heck if I know.”

There it is...that “heck if I know.” People in Kyoto—no, all of Kansai—love to deflect with that when you press them about something. It seems irresponsible, but I don’t mind that kind of retort.

At any rate, Kaori’s words were convincing. Her family owned a kimono fabric store, after all.

Grandma loves kimono, so I’ll ask her to help me put one on. Starting today, I’ll try wearing one when I’m at home.

3

I didn’t have work that day, so I went straight home after school, changed out of my uniform, and peeked into my grandmother’s room.

“Grandma?”

She was always in her room on the first floor or sitting on the porch and knitting or sewing. Sometimes she would make conversation with the neighbors passing by.

“Yes, dear?” she responded in a carefree tone.

“Do you have a minute?”

The sliding screen door was open, so I could see her relaxing on the porch in a kimono as usual.

“Of course.” She nodded, smiling gently.

“Thanks. I got invited to a tea ceremony, and I’m thinking of going in a kimono,” I said, stepping inside. It was a Japanese-style room, and I took care not to walk on the borders of the tatami mats because I didn’t want to get scolded. I knelt in front of her and sat on my heels.

“That’s wonderful.” She smiled cheerfully. “Do you want a *homongi* or something less formal? We might as well go with a *homongi*. I have a lot to choose from.”

As I had learned on New Year’s Eve, she was always happy when I said I wanted to wear a kimono.

“Thank you, but first I want to try wearing one around the house like you do, so that I can get used to it.”

Her eyes widened. *She’s asked me if I wanted to wear a kimono several times in the past, but I always said, “I’m not going to wear a kimono on a normal day. It tires me out.”*

“Kiyotaka will be at this tea ceremony, right?” she said, chuckling with her hand over her mouth.

“Y-Yes...” I murmured, embarrassed.

Grandma nodded in understanding and said, “Let’s get to it, then. It’s already July, so let’s go with a *sha*.” She enthusiastically stood up.

A *sha* is a casual summer kimono made of thin fabric. A formal summer kimono is called a *ro*.

Grandma opened her wooden chest of drawers and took out several kimono wrapped in paper. They were all bright summer colors like light blue, lime green, and yellow.

“Wow, they’re so pretty!” I remarked.

“Mmhm. You can’t get such pretty colors with Western clothes, but kimono have them.”

“You might be right about that.”

“When it’s hotter, you can wear a yukata instead.”

I nodded.

“Which do you want?” she asked.

“Let’s go with the light blue one.” It was a lovely cyan, perfect for early summer.

Grandma nodded proudly and said, “A beautiful color, right?”

She skillfully started wrapping it around me. Less than an hour later, I was already dressed up. My mom and my younger brother were shocked when they saw me, but I explained the situation and declared, “For the next week or so, I’m going to wear a kimono while I’m home.”

“Sis...going out with Holmes is hard for you, huh?” quipped my younger brother, Mutsuki. I ignored him.

Thus began my kimono life at home.

The first challenge was walking smoothly. Traditional Japanese clothes have the hem on the right side, which means it’s better to take the first step with your left foot. You walk with your toes pointed slightly inwards, shuffling along the ground in ten-centimeter steps, careful not to create a gap between your knees. Apparently, you want to fully straighten the rear knee when you step forward so that your waist height stays consistent.

When climbing stairs, you gently lift up the vertical hem so that the bottom won’t get caught on the steps. This also makes it easier to lift your feet. I also learned that it’s better to turn your body slightly diagonal to the stairs.

While helping with housework, I tucked the sleeves up with sashes called *tasuki*. I kept them that way while studying. Kaori was right—wearing a kimono kept my back straight, which felt like it made it easier to concentrate.

The first day was embarrassing. I went to buy things at the local mom-and-pop stores, and I could hear people talking about me. But I explained the situation, and after a few days, no one commented on

my clothes anymore. Going out in a kimono wasn't that strange in Kyoto to begin with. *It's probably the easiest city in Japan to wear one in.*

But sometimes, my grandma's friends would say things like, "That really suits you, Aoi. You should keep wearing kimono after the tea ceremony." And they meant it, which made me happy.

Wearing a kimono was tiring at first, but once I got used to it, it really wasn't a problem anymore. It also gave me a sense of pride.

I think I'll go back to Western-style clothes after the tea ceremony, but it might be nice to wear a kimono more often.

4

"Aoi, have you been learning something new?" Holmes asked out of the blue.

I had stopped by Kura after school to have Holmes check my homework. He was busy with university these days, so he wasn't at the store often. It'd been a while since we last saw each other. After studying for about an hour at the counter, the manager came in and Holmes called for a break. I nodded and quietly stood up, shifted my books and notes aside, and wiped down the counter. Holmes stared at me as I did so, and that was when he asked.

"Huh?" I stopped and looked up. "No, I haven't." There were plenty of things I *wanted* to learn, but unfortunately, I had entrance exams to contend with. There was no time for learning new things.

"Is that so?" Holmes seemed puzzled as he went to the kitchenette.

The manager sat down across from me and gave me his usual kind smile. "Hello, Aoi. It's been a while, huh?"

"Yes, it has. Lately I haven't been doing anything but studying at home."

"Third-years have it tough. Thank you for coming here to watch the store every now and then despite that."

"I-It's fine. Holmes is tutoring me, so..." I shrank back, feeling ashamed. I was basically on leave from work, only stopping by when Holmes was at the store so that he could check my homework. When he had to leave for some kind of errand, I watched the store in his place. They had said they would pay me for that time, but I'd declined. They let me study here, and Holmes was tutoring me—accepting a sudden shift was the least I could do in return. So even though I still often visited Kura, I didn't work on weekdays and only worked on weekends when asked to.

I do come here most weekends for tutoring, though... Holmes was a grad student and a great teacher. My grades were steadily rising. *I'm so blessed by my environment.*

Also, now that I was on leave from work, Rikyu was helping out at Kura instead.

Holmes returned from the kitchenette and laid out the cups on the counter. A rich aroma filled the store.

“Thank you,” I said, taking a sip of the coffee and sighing in appreciation. *Who knew coffee could taste so good after an intense study session?* I used to think black coffee was too bitter, but after doing my best to continue drinking it, I had managed to grow fairly accustomed to it. *Maybe this is how you mature into liking drinks for adults.*

“Come to think of it, which university are you aiming for?” the manager asked, looking at me.

“Umm, Kyoto Prefectural is the goal, but...” *With my current grades, it’s a coin flip whether I’ll get in.*

“Ah, KPU. That’s Kiyotaka’s alma mater.”

“Yes.” I nodded, feeling slightly embarrassed.

“Kiyotaka, you must be happy that Aoi is becoming your junior,” the manager said, grinning at Holmes.

“Yes, I am,” Holmes said. “But Kyoto has so many other good schools, like Kyoto Women’s University, Doshisha Women’s College, Notre Dame University, Kacho University, Koka Women’s University, and St. Agnes University. I don’t think you need to focus on KPU—though it is an excellent school, of course.” He smiled.

My face stiffened. “Umm, those are all women’s universities, right?”

“Ah, you’re right. My apologies.” He grinned mischievously.

“Oh, so you want Aoi to go to a women’s university.” The manager smiled cheerfully and sipped his coffee.

“No, not at all,” Holmes said. “What matters most is that she can attend the school she wants. But I can’t deny that I have a slight hope for her to go to a women’s university... A very slight hope.”

So basically, he definitely wants me to go to a women’s university. That’s Holmes for you. I raised a hand to my mouth to hide my creeping smile.

Holmes froze and looked at me. Unsure how to react, I gently put down my cup and met his gaze.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

He averted his eyes and put a hand in front of his own mouth.

“You seem different somehow, Aoi.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind, it’s nothing. Oh, right, about Saito’s tea ceremony...”

“Yes?”

“It’s going to be this Sunday at 1:30 p.m. Does that work for you?”

“Yes, that’s fine.” I nodded.

“Good.” He smiled.

“Oh yeah, I wanted *kaishi* paper and toothpicks for sweets. Do they sell those around here?” My grandmother had them, but I wanted my own.

Holmes and the manager answered in unison, “Ah, if you’re looking for those, Mieko’s shop has them.”

I hid my mouth again and giggled. “Like father, like son.”

Holmes froze again, his eyes wide.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It’s nothing,” he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent. “I believe I may be feeling off today.” He placed the back of his hand on his forehead and looked down. His cheeks seemed reddish.

“Are you all right?” I asked, reaching for him.

He hurriedly stood up and said, “I’m fine. Anyway, since dad’s here now, do you want to take a breather and go to Mieko’s shop? She sells tea utensils too.”

The manager grinned and nodded. “That’s a good idea. Take your time.”

“Thank you. Let’s go, then.” I nodded and slowly stood up.

We left and walked leisurely to Mieko’s store, which was just on the opposite corner of the intersection. The clothes she sold were mainly targeted at housewives, so it didn’t seem like the kind of place young women would visit. That said, it did have really cute dresses at times. Especially now, in early summer, the store saw more young customers, lured in by the storefront display of brightly-colored yukata with floral, butterfly, and goldfish patterns.

Mieko was arranging the contents of the carts in front of the store.

“Hello, Mieko,” I said in greeting.

“We came to buy something,” Holmes added.

Mieko’s expression brightened. “Aoi and Kiyotaka here as customers? Why, what do you need?”

“We’re going to a tea ceremony, and I wanted to buy *kaishi* paper and toothpicks for sweets,” I said.

She gave us a wrinkly smile. “How nice. Come, the tea corner is this way.” She led us into the store and pointed to a shelf in the back. “Right over there.”

The tea corner was graciously organized according to the many schools of tea ceremony, although most of the utensils were shared between them. There was a lot more variety than I’d expected: *fukusa* cloths for wiping utensils, tea-ceremony-specific folding fans, *kaishi* paper, toothpicks for sweets, and silk pouches. The *kaishi* paper came in a variety of designs. They all had lovely patterns fitting for the season, like morning glories, round paper fans, goldfish, and hydrangeas.

"They're all so nice," I said. "I don't know which one to choose."

"How about this one?" Holmes suggested. "It has aoi leaves. I think it's perfect for you."

"Oh, you're right! Thank you."

I placed what I needed in the shopping basket and looked around the rest of the store. But when I went to pay...

"Kiyotaka already took care of the payment, dear. Let me put those in a bag for you."

"Huh?" Startled, I turned to Holmes and bowed. "S-Sorry."

I gave Mieko the basket. She put the tea ceremony set in a paper bag and handed it to me, saying, "Thank you kindly."

"Thank you, Holmes," I said, bowing to him again after we left the store.

"Don't worry about it," he said, shaking his head. "While we're out here, shall we go for a walk?" He took my hand, entwining his fingers with mine. My heart skipped a beat.

"Okay," I said, looking down in embarrassment. I gently held his hand back.

We walked for a while before Holmes scratched his head and sighed. "This is dangerous," he said, easing back into his Kyoto accent. "You're dangerous today, Aoi."

"I am?"

"No, the problem isn't you. It's me. It's been some time since I last saw you," he murmured.

"There's a problem with you?" I tilted my head. *What's he talking about?*

"Aoi...I have a secret hideaway near here. Would you like to see it?"

"A secret hideaway?"

"Yes. When I was a child, I called it my secret base."

"Wow, I'd love to see it!"

"It's this way." He led me by the hand into an alley narrow enough that I had to walk behind him. On the other end was a wide, open space surrounded by buildings on all four sides. The sun shone brightly, and I could hear the distant hustle and bustle of the shopping arcade.

"I never knew there was a place like this hidden within these busy streets," I said. "It feels strange for there to be such a big, empty space when there are so many people outside. It really is like a secret base, huh?"

"Right? When I was a child, I often came here to play."

"I can see that. It really appeals to a child's adventurous heart." I looked around excitedly.

Holmes sighed. "I'm not a child anymore in the slightest, though."

"Huh?"

"Sorry, the reason I brought you here is...um..."

"Y-Yes?"

"You're...too cute today, Aoi. I couldn't help but want more...physical contact," he said sheepishly, making my heart skip a beat.

We stayed silent for some time. Despite what he said, he didn't even reach for my hand. I didn't know what to do—I could only stand there, embarrassed.

Holmes held out his arms. "Come here, Aoi."

I was so shocked that I almost forgot to breathe. *How can those words be so powerful? I've never felt such a gravitational pull from words before. This is too unfair. I mean, if he says "come here," I have no choice but to go.*

I slowly approached him, and he pulled me into a tight hug. "Aoi..." he said, gently caressing my head with his large hand.

We shared an embrace while listening to the muffled commotion coming from the shopping arcade. Being in Holmes's arms felt so unreal that I held onto him tightly, as if to ensure that I wasn't dreaming.

5

Sunday was the day of the tea ceremony at the Saito estate in Takagamine. When I told Holmes that I was going to wear a kimono, he decided to come to my house to pick me up. Since the ceremony was at 1:30 p.m., we also decided to meet earlier in the day for lunch.

That morning, I was standing in front of the mirror while my grandmother dressed me in the kimono. Lately I'd been putting it on by myself—albeit clumsily—but since I had to wear it properly today, I had asked her to help me. It was a summery pale-yellow kimono made of light silk, with a morning glory pattern and a light lime green double-width sash.

I did consider wearing the *homongi* that the owner and his girlfriend had given me for my birthday, but that one was a "lined" kimono. Similar to how there's summer clothing and winter clothing, there are lined, unlined, and silk kimono. Lined kimono are thick, so they're worn in spring, fall, and winter, but now that air conditioning is commonplace, a lot of people apparently wear them year round. So it wouldn't necessarily be strange to wear the *homongi* in summer, but I decided not to because it was too fancy. Unlined kimono are worn in June and September, when it's neither hot nor cold, and silk kimono—like the one I was wearing now—are worn in July and August. The

lightweight fabric feels cool and refreshing.

Apparently, there are people who don't wear silk kimono unless they're going outside, but I like how light they feel. I looked at myself in the mirror and felt embarrassed but also proud. *Is this the pride that comes with Japanese clothes?*

I checked the time. It was almost 10:30. Holmes would be arriving soon, so I started preparing to head out.

"Sis, Holmes is here!" shouted Mutsuki.

"Coming!" I picked up the "Rikyu" bag, which was the same color as my sash, and quickly stood up. But although I was in a hurry, I made sure not to make any flustered movements. I headed to the front door—touching the back of my neck to make sure there weren't any stray hairs—and found Holmes in a suit, giving my mother a box of sweets.

He's always so perfect.

Holmes saw me and blinked. "Aoi?"

"Sorry to keep you waiting." I gave a slight bow and smiled.

He stared at me, dumbfounded.

"I-Is this kimono not appropriate for the tea ceremony?" I nervously placed my hand on my chest.

He shook his head hesitantly. "No, it's very nice."

"Thank you." Relieved, I put on my shoes.

"Take care of Aoi for us, Kiyotaka," said my mother, bowing.

"I will." He bowed back with a wide smile.

"Sis has been wearing a kimono at home every day just for this," my younger brother announced.

"You really didn't have to tell him that," I said with an awkward smile.

"Huh?" murmured Holmes.

We said goodbye to my family and left the house. Holmes went straight to the car and opened the passenger door for me.

"Thank you," I said. I put my bag in the car first, then gently lowered myself into the seat, rotating my body into a forward-facing position as I brought my feet inside the car.

Once I was seated, Holmes closed the door and went around to the driver's side.

"Was Mutsuki telling the truth about wearing a kimono at home every day?" he murmured as he started the car.

"Oh, yes. I didn't want to cause problems by wearing something I wasn't used to, so I wore a kimono at home. Thanks to that, I'm a lot more comfortable wearing them now, but I still have a long way to go."

"That solves the mystery, then."

"What mystery?"

“Your mannerisms, or rather, the way you carried yourself suddenly became much more feminine, which threw me off. I thought you started learning flower arrangement or traditional dance, but you said you didn’t, so I was wondering what happened.”

“Did I change that much?”

“Yes, it was hard to rein in my excitement.”

“What?” I burst out laughing.

After a pause, he murmured, “It still is.”

Feeling a rush of heat spread across my face, I looked down helplessly and stayed like that for a while, Holmes smiling cheerfully the whole time.

“I really do think it’s wonderful how you always try your best when it comes to everything,” he said with a serious face.

“No...” I looked up. “It’s not like that. I had fun doing it.”

“That’s exactly it. If you were forcing yourself to try your best or if you showed off about how hard you tried, that would be unfortunate. But being able to *enjoy* trying your best is truly amazing.”

“Holmes...”

“I’m always moved by that aspect of you.”

“Th-Thank you.” My chest felt warm with embarrassment and happiness. *I’m always moved by him too. He notices little details about me and compliments me. I think that’s why I can enjoy trying my best...* Feeling a silly smile coming on, I turned away from him and looked out the window.

We headed to Kitayama and had lunch at a hole-in-the-wall Western restaurant.

After lunch, we went back to the car. Again, I got in first.

“Ukon said there was no need to ‘visit the kitchen,’ but it wouldn’t feel right to show up empty-handed, so I was thinking of buying some sweets,” Holmes said as he sat down in the driver’s seat.

“Is it okay to bring sweets to a tea ceremony?” *Tea ceremonies are where the host provides tea and sweets, after all.*

“It’s generally not recommended to bring high-end fresh sweets to a tea ceremony, because it’d be awkward if they overlapped with what the host was serving. However, it’s not a taboo, and regular sweets are allowed. I was thinking of buying *matsukaze*. There’s a famous old *matsukaze* confectionery next to Daitoku-ji Temple.”

“What kind of dessert is *matsukaze*?” I tilted my head.

Holmes froze in the middle of fastening his seat belt. “Er...you don’t know what *matsukaze* is, Aoi?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Do people in Kanto not eat it?”

“I don’t know, but I never have. I don’t think my mom would

know about it either.”

“I see. That’s a bit of a surprise.” He gripped the steering wheel, looking genuinely shocked.

“You know, Holmes, sometimes I can’t tell if you’re knowledgeable or oblivious.”

“Yes, I’m a ‘sheltered boy,’ after all,” he quipped.

I laughed. “That’s a nostalgic phrase.”

“Indeed. I still can’t forget the shock I felt upon being called that.”

“I wish I could’ve been there. That was when you first met Ensho at Nanzen-ji Temple, right?”

“Yes. Akihito was with me at the time.” He stopped talking and his face became slightly sterner.

He must be thinking about Ensho. Back in April, Ensho stole Kura’s Shino tea bowl and even set up a bomb in an old apartment to threaten Holmes with, but he hasn’t made a single move since. Is he still plotting something?

I frowned, feeling bitter.

6

It was still early, so we decided to go to Daitoku-ji Temple before buying the sweets. Holmes parked near the temple.

“We came to this area before, right?” I wondered aloud as we walked.

“Yes, we went to Imamiya Shrine, which is just north of here.”

“Oh, right!” I clapped my hands. I remembered that trip clearly. “It was called the ‘marry rich’ shrine, right? The roasted mochi was really good.” Remembering the soft mochi skewers glazed in light brown miso sauce made my mouth water.

“I wanted to stop by Daitoku-ji Temple too, but we didn’t have time. It’s a very big temple.”

We passed through the main gate into the temple grounds.

“You’re right, it is big,” I said, looking at the map.

“It covers a large area, and it has many structures. There’s the Chokushimon gate, the Sanmon gate, the Butsuden hall, the Hatto hall, and several sub-temples. Also, this temple is known for being rebuilt by Sojun Ikkyu after it was destroyed in the Onin War.”

“I’d heard that it was Ikkyu’s temple, but I didn’t know that that happened.”

“It’s also linked to Sen no Rikyu, the master of tea ceremonies. There are many historical buildings here, but most of them aren’t open to the public outside of special events, so that limits the places to see.”

I nodded and looked around. The temple grounds extended as far

as the eye could see, and the paths were wide too. Since I was wearing a kimono, Holmes walked slowly to match my pace. Shortly past the main gate, we turned right and saw a vermilion gate.

“This is Sanmon, the mountain gate,” he explained.

“It’s very grand.”

It was a majestic, two-story gate. The ground layer was divided by posts into five sections, with the middle three being doors. It had a tiled hip-and-gable roof, and it was flanked on both sides by small buildings.

“Indeed. The lower level was built in the sixth year of the Daiei period with the assistance of Socho, a poet. However, it remained incomplete for sixty-three years until the Tensho period, when Sen no Rikyu built the upper level.”

I nodded along with his explanation.

“Perhaps because of that, a wooden statue of Sen no Rikyu was installed on the upper level. However, this incurred the wrath of Hideyoshi Toyotomi, and Sen no Rikyu met an unfortunate fate.”

An unfortunate fate... Right, Sen no Rikyu was Hideyoshi Toyotomi’s close confidant, but Hideyoshi became displeased with him and ordered him to commit suicide by disembowelment.

“Why was he upset about the wooden statue?” I asked.

“There are many theories. For example, if Rikyu’s statue was above the gate, that meant Hideyoshi had to walk under Rikyu’s feet. It was only one of the catalysts, though,” Holmes explained as we slowly walked.

“One of the catalysts...”

“Considering Hideyoshi worked his way up from peasant to ruler of Japan, he likely felt very insecure about his origin. That was why he admired Rikyu, who had a sophisticated sense of beauty. He wanted to learn from Rikyu and absorb his aesthetics. Rikyu was born in Sakai, but he had the heart of a Kyoto man—in other words, he was wicked on the inside. This is a roundabout way of saying that he must’ve been constantly making snide remarks that provoked Hideyoshi’s inferiority complex. That’s my theory, at least.” He smiled, seeming slightly amused.

“Just like you and Akihito, huh?”

“Now that’s an upsetting thought.”

“Is it?”

We laughed as we continued to walk.

“We don’t have time to see everything, so let’s look at Koto-in Temple today,” Holmes suggested, holding out his hand. “It’s known for its beautiful moss.”

“Okay.” I took his hand and we headed for our next destination.

On the way, Holmes explained that Koto-in was one of Daitoku-ji

Temple's sub-temples. It was founded in the sixth year of the Keicho era by Tadaoki Hosokawa, an early-Edo military commander who was also a famous tea master. As a tea master, he went by the name of Sansai Hosokawa.

The temple had been built as a family grave for Tadaoki's father, Fujitaka, who was also known as Yusai. Tadaoki's uncle had been the first head priest.

"Koto-in Temple is now the gravesite for Tadaoki Hosokawa and his wife, Gracia," Holmes said.

The entrance to Koto-in Temple was inconspicuous—a small, modest gate.

I guess this is what sub-temples are like...

We passed through, took a sharp right, and were met with what could only be described as pure green. I stopped, stunned by the beauty of the narrow stone path leading straight ahead to the next gate. The path cut through a forest of bamboo stalks and trees, and there were bamboo railings on both sides of it.

Maybe this kind of stillness is what "ultimate beauty" means.

Holmes stopped next to me.

It's strange... I want to stay here forever, but I also want to keep going and see even more beautiful sights.

"This place...really is beautiful," I sighed. That was all I could say.

"Indeed, it's magnificent." He nodded. "In spring and summer, it's shrouded in green. In autumn, the leaves turn red, and in winter, the snow makes for yet another beautiful sight."

"I can imagine." We began walking again. *The place must be beautiful in fall and winter too...but I don't think I'll ever forget this breathtaking green spectacle.*

"The highlights of Koto-in Temple include the head priest's maple garden and the Shokoken tea room," Holmes said.

Because of the kimono, I could only take small steps. It could be frustrating at times, but right now, I appreciated it because the slow pace gave me time to thoroughly take everything in.

In front of the maple garden, there was a stone lantern. It stood all by itself, making for an incredibly tense scene. It wove together light, shadow, and greenery, almost as if it were a representation of Koto-in Temple.

"Perfect placement, right? It's splendid," Holmes commented in a quiet yet passionate tone, placing a hand on his chest.

I nodded and stared at the lantern. Amid the solemn stillness, the wind rustled in the trees. *How long has this scenery existed for?* It was as if time had stopped.

We stood there for a while before setting off again. Next was the tea room, Shokoken. Apparently, it had been moved here but had

originally been built by Tadaoki Hosokawa for Hideyoshi Toyotomi's Grand Kitano Tea Ceremony.

The room was rather modest. *I thought this kind of tea room would be dark inside, but it does let in plenty of sunlight.*

After looking around with great interest, we headed for our last destination: the stone lantern that was considered Tadaoki Hosokawa and his wife's grave. Some of their bones were kept there.

"The stone lantern in front of the maple garden was a replica of the one here," Holmes said, looking fondly at the lantern.

"They copied this one?"

"Yes. This lantern is a memento of Sen no Rikyu, Tadaoki Hosokawa's tea master. Look at the back side—do you see how it's broken?"

I walked around to the side and craned my neck to look at the back of the lantern. Sure enough, part of it was broken off. "Oh, you're right."

"Hideyoshi Toyotomi wanted this lantern, but Rikyu didn't want to give it to him, so he purposely broke part of it off and said, 'I can't give you a broken item.' Then, when Rikyu was ordered to commit suicide, he gave this lantern to Tadaoki."

"Oh..."

"And now it marks the Hosokawa grave. Come to think of it, when I was learning history as a child, I thought that Gracia Hosokawa was a foreigner. But 'Gracia' was her baptismal name."

I giggled, thinking back to my past misconceptions.

"Her original name was Tama. She was the daughter of Mitsuhide Akechi, and by Nobunaga Oda's recommendation, she married Tadaoki Hosokawa at the age of fifteen. But if you recall, her father Mitsuhide killed Nobunaga in the Honno-ji incident."

"R-Right."

"That made Tama the daughter of a traitor. Ordinarily, Tadaoki's family would call for a divorce. However, Tadaoki loved her deeply and didn't want to divorce her, so he confined her in northern Kyoto. Two years later, Hideyoshi arranged for her to be returned to the Hosokawa residence in Osaka."

I might've already heard this story in history class, but hearing it from Holmes in front of their grave made my eyes well up with tears.

"However, Tama may have endured a lot of hardship. She encountered Catholic teachings and became a believer. She had a Christian baptism performed without Tadaoki's knowledge and received the name Gracia."

"I see. But he would've easily found out, right?"

"Yes, it wasn't something that could be hidden. The baptism was right after Hideyoshi's proclamation against Christianity. Tadaoki was

furious, but it seems his love didn't waver. His anger may have been an act for Hideyoshi."

I nodded.

"Right before the Battle of Sekigahara, Mitsunari Ishida tried to take Gracia hostage in order to make Tadaoki surrender, but Gracia refused to be captured. She had their chief retainer kill her with a spear. For the sake of her family and husband, she chose death. It hurts to think of how Tadaoki must have felt. Now, Tadaoki and Gracia rest here, in complete peace."

The area fell silent. Seeing the lantern that contained so much history and emotion filled me with pain and adoration. As we stared at the sleeping lantern, Holmes grasped my hand. I squeezed back. *I'm glad I got to come here.*

7

After that, we left Daitoku-ji Temple and headed for Matsuya Tobei, a long-established confectionery. It was right next to the temple, on Kitaoji Street. The storefront was simple, but you could sense how much history the store had cultivated since its founding in the Edo period.

Holmes opened the sliding door and said, "Hello, it's me, Kiyotaka." I was surprised that he'd name himself upon entering.

"Hello, Kiyotaka," said the woman behind the counter, presumably the store's proprietress. "Long time no see," she greeted him with a smile.

"It really has been a long time," Holmes replied.

A man wearing a white chef's uniform came out from the back. "Haven't seen you in quite a while, Kiyotaka. Seiji came by the other day."

"Oh yes," said the woman, giggling. "He was as sprightly as ever."

Apparently, this store knew the Yagashiras too. *Kyoto's web of connections never ceases to amaze me.*

"I imagine he said something unnecessary again," Holmes said, slumping his shoulders.

"Spot-on. He was gloating about how you got a cute girlfriend," the woman replied in an amused tone. Normally, I associated long-established sweets stores with a thick Kyoto accent, but hers felt cheerful and friendly. Her husband, who was smiling next to her, had a very calm and gentle aura.

But still, gloating?

Standing behind Holmes, I looked down in embarrassment. Noticing that the couple had shifted their eyes to me, I quickly got myself back together and bowed.

"My name is Aoi. It's nice to meet you."

The man smiled gently and said, "I can see why he'd gloat."

"She certainly is a lovely one, Kiyotaka," said the woman.

"Yes, thank you," said Holmes with a proud smile.

I was too embarrassed to look back up.

"Ah, you wanted *matsukaze* today, yes?" The woman quickly brought out a box. It seemed they had already prepared it. The box was wrapped in beautiful pine-colored paper with the word "Matsukaze" written in white. Upon closer inspection, there were other words too. One of them was "Natto," which made me squint.

"Natto?" I murmured.

"Yes," said Holmes. "This shop's *matsukaze* has Daitoku-ji natto in it."

"Natto? Like fermented soybeans?" I blinked.

The proprietress chuckled. "No, it's not the sticky natto you're thinking of."

"It's an ancient recipe," explained the husband. "Unlike modern natto, it's salty and tastes similar to miso."

"Aoi is from Kanto, so she doesn't know what *matsukaze* is," said Holmes.

The couple nodded.

"It's not common knowledge in Kanto," said the man.

"They don't have tea ceremonies as often as we do," the woman added.

They didn't seem surprised, likely because they had met countless customers who didn't know what it was.

The proprietress took out another *matsukaze* box and opened it. "This is *matsukaze*, Aoi," she said, showing it to me. Inside the rectangular white box were sponge cakes cut into squares. The top surface was dark brown and had sesame seeds.

"We normally don't offer samples, but feel free to try one." She handed me a toothpick.

"Thank you," I said, taking one of the pieces and biting into it. Much to my surprise, it was chewy, not soft like I'd expected. The light-brown miso, Daitoku-ji natto, and sesame blended exquisitely into a rich, unique flavor. And then there was the aroma...

This would definitely go well with both tea and coffee. "It's delicious," I said, not moving my hand away from my mouth even after I had finished eating. "I could get addicted to this taste."

The couple nodded happily.

I want to show my family this too. Dad and grandma are Kyoto natives, so they might be familiar with it already, but I'm sure mom and Mutsuki haven't eaten it before. Besides, dad and grandma probably haven't eaten it recently, so they'll be happy too.

“May I buy another box?” I asked. “I want to bring my family a souvenir.”

“Why thank you,” said the proprietress. She quickly brought a new box out.

Holmes immediately took out his wallet, but I held out my hand and said, “Oh, it’s okay. Thank you, but since it’s a souvenir for my family, I want to pay for it myself. Thank you for your consideration, though.” *I appreciate how he’s always considerate, and I think it’s very gentlemanly of him. But I can’t have him pay for everything. That wouldn’t feel right.*

“Oh...I see...” He slumped his shoulders, disappointed.

The couple chuckled. “It’s just like Seiji said,” the husband remarked. “You’re a charming girl with good principles.”

It made me happy to know that the owner had said that about me.

“Oh, right, Aoi,” the proprietress offered, “I’ll give you this as a bonus.” She added to the paper bag what looked like bread crusts in a plastic bag.

“Thank you,” I replied. “What’s that?”

“They’re called ‘fortune crusts.’ They’re like bread crusts, except they’re made when we slice *matsukaze*. We can only make them once every two hours, so only customers who come in at the right time can buy them. They have an even better aroma than the *matsukaze* themselves.” She grinned.

“Wow, thank you!” My mouth watered at the delicious smell of miso coming from the bag.

Holmes and I thanked the couple again and left the store with our *matsukaze*.

8

Takagamine was less than a ten-minute drive from Daitoku-ji Temple. It was considered to be one of the high-class districts in Kyoto. The Saito residence was in a quiet neighborhood accessed by turning north before the point where North Oji Street becomes West Oji Street.

“It’s over there, right?” I asked, looking at an estate up on the hill. It was built in an unusual way that resembled the building in Aomori’s Seibien Garden—the first floor was Japanese style and the second floor was Western style.

We arrived five minutes before the appointed time. The garden surrounding the half-Japanese, half-Western house was just as splendid as last time. There was a pond encircled by rocks, and I could see a beautiful rock garden on the other side. It had been early spring when we’d last come here, so the scenery had been rather bleak, but

now we were surrounded by vivid greenery. What stood out most to me were the morning glories, which were in full bloom. I considered myself to be familiar with morning glories, but these felt very high-class in this well-kept garden. Perhaps it was their bluish-purple color that made them seem so refined. That said, morning glories are supposed to bloom in the morning and fade quickly...

"Are those a sister species of morning glories?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. There are morning glories that bloom from morning until evening too. Either way, these are magnificent flowers."

"They really are." I nodded eagerly as we walked on the stepping stones.

The front door opened and a middle-aged man wearing a suit came out to greet us. "Thank you for coming today, Kiyotaka and Aoi," he said, bowing deeply. He was the butler of the house, Suzuki.

"Thank you for inviting us," we said, bowing back.

He led us to the drawing room at the end of the first floor, the same one as before. There was a dark brown leather sofa and an olive-brown table and chest. One of the walls had a fireplace built into it and tall windows with elegant, shimmery curtains. Last time, this lovely room hadn't had a single piece of art in it, which had felt strange to me. But now, it was fully decorated. The artwork must've been moved out of the room that day.

"Kiyo!" exclaimed Rikyu.

"Thanks for coming today, Kiyotaka and Aoi," said Sakyo.

Tsukasa, Sakyo's younger brother, was in the room with them. Though I hadn't seen him since I was last here, he seemed exactly the same as before. He gave off a very robust impression with his height, broad shoulders, and square face. He would've seemed like a great person if he'd had a gentle aura, but instead he still looked like the temperamental and unpleasant type.

"Hello to you too, Tsukasa," said Holmes.

"It's been a while," I added, bowing.

Tsukasa responded with the slightest of nods before quickly turning away. Apparently, he didn't want to talk to Holmes.

He really hasn't changed. I forced a smile.

The drawing room door opened, and an elderly man with grizzled hair appeared, wearing semiformal Japanese clothes. The man—Ukon—had gentle facial features, but there was a sharp look in his eyes. Last time he'd been using a cane, but today he was in a wheelchair. Perhaps this impairment was part of the reason he had summoned Sakyo here from Tokyo.

"Good to see you again, you two," he said to us, smiling gently.

"Thank you for inviting us today," Holmes and I replied together, bowing deeply.

Ukon's eyes widened upon seeing me. "Why, you look very lovely today, Aoi."

Now it was my turn to widen my eyes. I hadn't expected to hear that. "Th-Thank you."

"It's only when you're young and growing that you can become so beautiful in such a short amount of time," he said solemnly.

I looked down and rubbed my knees together.

"As for me, I only get further in my old age," he continued. "My knees are in constant pain. There are times when I'm fine, but you'll have to excuse me for using a wheelchair today."

We nodded respectfully.

"Ukon, you said there was no need to bring anything, but regardless, please allow me to thank you for inviting us," Holmes said, taking the box of *matsukaze* out of the bag and handing it to the older man.

"Oh, you really didn't need to go to the trouble," Ukon said. "Thanks, I love *matsukaze*." He smiled and accepted the box with both hands. "I'm inviting my friends for a tea ceremony tomorrow, and I had Sakyo and Tsukasa each prepare a tea room. Since you're my grandson's teacher and a young connoisseur who will play a leading role in the future, I'd like you to see them and judge which one should be used."

"I'm going to choose the tea room?" Still smiling, Holmes tilted his head. I was surprised too, since we had thought that Ukon would be making the final decision.

"Yes, I'd like you to choose the one that resonates with me more." Ukon's mouth was curved into a smile, but there was a sharp look in his eyes.

"I'm honored, but there's no guarantee that my decision will match your opinion."

Ukon smiled in amusement and said, "That's fine. I just want to choose the one that moves a young connoisseur's heart."

"I see. In that case, I humbly accept."

"Thank you very much for accepting this unconventional request."

I gulped as I watched them talk. *It seems like a simple matter of choosing a room, but there could be a much bigger meaning behind it.*

"Let's get started, then," said Ukon, giving the *matsukaze* box to Suzuki. "Whose room should we see first?" He looked between his sons.

"I'm okay with either," said Sakyo with a grin.

"Let's go to mine first, then," Tsukasa said in a strong voice, stepping forward as if he didn't want to wait for a response. I could tell that he was a very impatient person.

"All right, let's start with Tsukasa's room," said Ukon.

Tsukasa nodded with a self-assured smirk, walking off in long strides. *What kind of tea room did he prepare for him to be so confident?*

Tsukasa's room was in a separate building, past a long corridor. He walked in front, followed by Ukon. Sakyō was pushing the wheelchair—when Suzuki had tried to, Sakyō had stopped him and insisted that he would do it. I was walking behind them with Holmes and Rikyu, looking around the corridor. I hadn't seen it when I was here before, so the door had probably been closed at the time.

I looked out at the garden, where the greenery looked beautiful in the afternoon sun. *There were such beautiful morning glories in front of the house, but there aren't any on this side.* Something about that didn't feel right. I looked closer and saw that there *were* morning glories, but the flowers had all been cut off, leaving only the leaves. *Did he want everything to be green?* With mixed feelings, I looked away from the flowerless morning glories.

Tsukasa stopped before the sliding screen that led to the room and looked at Ukon. "This is the tea room that I prepared, dad," he said proudly.

"Open the door," Ukon said in a very quiet voice.

There was an air of suspense as Tsukasa slowly slid the screen open.

The room was the size of twelve tatami mats, which were in the layout used for auspicious events. The paper sliding screen facing to the outside of the building was closed tight. Since the room didn't have any particularly special features, the single morning glory displayed in the alcove was very eye-catching. The vase was ancient Bizen ware, almost black in color. It made the bluish-purple morning glory look even more vivid.

Holmes nodded in understanding. "This is Sen no Rikyu's morning glory."

Sen no Rikyu's morning glory? I tilted my head.

Holmes gave a slight smile and said, "Rikyu once invited Hideyoshi to a tea ceremony, saying, 'Would you like to come see the morning glory?' Hideyoshi had recently heard that the morning glories blooming in Rikyu's garden were very beautiful, so he had high hopes, thinking, 'It'd be great to drink tea while gazing at the morning glories in the garden. And if Rikyu is inviting me to see them, they must be magnificent.' However, when Hideyoshi went to Rikyu's house, all of the morning glories had been cut off. Only a single flower was displayed in the tea room, and since there was only one, it was a brilliant decoration for the simple room. Hideyoshi was apparently awed by Rikyu's aesthetic sense."

"I didn't know that," I said.

"No wonder you're dad's favorite," Tsukasa muttered while

nodding. "Yeah, dad loves and respects Sen no Rikyu, and this room is a recreation of the single morning glory. Since he told us to prepare tea rooms at this time of year, I figured it had to be this. It's undeniably the 'ultimate' aesthetic."

The single flower in this room comes alive because we didn't see any morning glories on the way here. That's the spirit of simplicity—the ultimate aesthetic.

"I see," said Ukon. "Kiyotaka, please don't say anything about Tsukasa's room for the moment."

"Understood."

"Now then, let's see Sakyo's room next."

I felt nervous even though I had nothing to do with the competition.

"Let's go through the outside corridor," said Sakyo in his usual carefree tone. "It'll be faster than going back to the entrance first. Dad, stand up for a bit so we can bring the wheelchair down. Rikyu, help him."

Rikyu and Holmes helped Ukon stand up.

"Tsukasa, help me bring the wheelchair down," Sakyo said, opening the paper screen. Before he could move the wheelchair, Ukon picked up the cane hanging from it and said, "It's fine. I can walk."

"Are you sure? Do you want me to carry you on my back?"

"That sounds utterly dangerous."

Sakyo laughed cheerfully and helped his father make his way to the external corridor. He must have predicted we would be taking this route, because there were already enough outdoor shoes prepared for everyone.

The building where he lived was visible from where we were. It was a tiny Japanese-style house that had likely been built as a tea room to begin with. Even in the short distance between the two rooms, there were many morning glories—but again, all of the flowers had been cut off.

Even if Sen no Rikyu and Hideyoshi Toyotomi really did call this the ultimate aesthetic, I can't help but feel sad about it...

"Come in," Sakyo said, opening the sliding screen door without hesitation.

This room also had twelve tatami mats in an auspicious layout, and just like Tsukasa's arrangement, there was a morning glory in the alcove. The bluish-purple flower was placed nicely in a green bamboo vase. There was also a hanging scroll with calligraphy saying, "*Though I live, should I trust so? Morning glories taught me of the world.*" It was a poem about the flower.

Sakyo walked to the paper screen, careful not to step on the borders of the tatami mats, and opened it all the way.

“Wow!” I murmured, impressed. The flowers outside looked full of life. “It’s as beautiful as a scene from a painting.”

“Yeah.” Sakyo nodded. “But you know, when I see these, it makes me think that art can never win against the real thing. I love the view from here.” He gazed admiringly at the flowers.

“Sakyo, what is that calligraphy?” Holmes asked, looking at the hanging scroll in the alcove.

“Oh, I wrote that. I think the sloppiness gives it charm.”

Though I live, should I trust so? Morning glories taught me of the world.

“Even though I’m alive now, I don’t know if that will still be the case tomorrow. That’s how this world is, and it was these morning glories that taught me that—a poem by Shikibu Izumi,” Holmes explained. “Morning glories bloom in the morning but fade quickly, representing the uncertainty of the world.”

“Yeah, I’m a big fan of Shikibu Izumi,” Sakyo said.

Tsukasa burst out laughing. “You wrote it yourself? Could you be any more disrespectful? Get a real calligrapher to do it. Plus, you didn’t do anything to this view—you just left it the way it was. The presentation sucked too. Also, the centerpiece is the vase in the alcove. I picked an expensive ancient Bizen vase, but what the heck is yours? Bamboo?”

“Yeah, I cut the bamboo that fell down in my garden. This was handmade too,” Sakyo said without shame.

Holmes’s eyes widened and he looked at the green bamboo vase. “You made that yourself? The opening is cut very cleanly. You’re quite skilled, aren’t you? The calligraphy is elegant too.”

“Yeah, I’m what they call a jack of all trades, master of none.” Sakyo raised his hand to his head and laughed heartily.

Ukon looked around the tea room and his face softened. “Kiyotaka?”

The room fell silent. Tsukasa was standing imposingly with his arms crossed, while Rikyu’s eyes were shining with curiosity. Sakyo was still grinning.

I anxiously looked up at Holmes. Would it be Tsukasa, who recreated the tea room where Sen no Rikyu once expressed to Hideyoshi Toyotomi the ultimate aesthetic? Or would it be Sakyo, who wrote his own calligraphy, created his own flower arrangement, and leveraged the existing scenery?

“Which tea room do you think resonates with me?” Ukon continued.

Holmes glanced down before looking around the room we were in and saying, “Sakyo’s room.”

“What?” Tsukasa snorted, facepalming. “You have no taste.

Actually, aren't you friends with Sakyo? You would've picked his room no matter what it looked like." He peered into Holmes's face.

"No, I looked at both rooms impartially and felt more attracted to Sakyo's."

"This totally unprofessional room?"

"Yes. Tsukasa, I didn't sense a hospitable heart from yours. Actually, I didn't feel any thoughtfulness at all."

"You didn't?"

"Correct. You knew the story of Sen no Rikyu's morning glory, and all you did was recreate it. There wasn't any hint of a desire to welcome your guests. On the other hand, Sakyo's room is brimming with the desire to entertain his visitors. The calligraphy he penned himself, the vase he carefully made himself, the flower in it, and his own beloved scenery... I honestly felt that if a tea ceremony were held here, it would be very enjoyable," Holmes said with his hand on his chest. I nodded wordlessly in complete agreement.

"Wait, you're praising me too much, Kiyotaka. I just did it in a way that was fun for me."

"And I thought that was wonderful."

Tsukasa gritted his teeth. "So you're rejecting Sen no Rikyu's aesthetic sense?" he muttered in a low, rumbling voice.

Holmes furrowed his brow. "When did I ever say that?" He turned around with a wide smile on his face. *Looks like that offended him.*

"You knew I recreated Sen no Rikyu's tea room, but you didn't pick it. That means you disagree with him, right?"

Holmes gave an exasperated shrug at Tsukasa's childish reasoning. "Sen no Rikyu's morning glory tea room was arranged for Hideyoshi Toyotomi. He cut all the flowers in his garden and placed a single one in the tea room. The story goes that Hideyoshi was impressed by Sen no Rikyu's aesthetics, but I can't help but interpret it as an extreme insult from Rikyu."

"An insult?"

"This is the same Rikyu who broke the stone lantern at Koto-in Temple so that he wouldn't have to give it to Hideyoshi. I can't imagine that he genuinely admired him. Cutting down all of the flowers, leaving only one to bloom—don't you think that was a perfect description of Hideyoshi?"

Hideyoshi Toyotomi cut off the heads of many and flourished alone. Holmes felt that Sen no Rikyu's morning glory tea room was an indirect way of expressing that.

"I'm not the only one who interprets it that way," continued Holmes. "There are many others among those who research Sen no Rikyu who share that opinion. It makes sense. There had to be an ulterior motive. Every time I hear the story of the morning glory tea

room, I feel a chill run down my spine from Sen no Rikyu's daring criticism." He smiled wryly.

Tsukasa stood still, not saying a word.

"However," Holmes continued, "what's important is that, regardless of the motive, Sen no Rikyu made that tea room for Hideyoshi. That means he put his heart into it. Tsukasa, all you did was copy the room from the story. There was no heart in it. That's why I chose Sakyo's room." He looked around again and said, "A tea ceremony is a place where one shows hospitality. Perhaps Ukon wanted to see your hearts through these tea rooms." He stared firmly at Tsukasa, who averted his gaze.

"I get your point. Now I want to know what dad thought."

Ukon sighed and smiled ruefully. "Tsukasa...when you're faced with something you want, you stop caring about what your actions look like to others. Your morning glory tea room might be a manifestation of the way you try to rise to the top by kicking everyone around you down."

Tsukasa gulped.

"Have a little more softness in your heart." It was a gentle warning, not a scolding. Ukon looked at the garden and said, "As Kiyotaka said, a tea ceremony is a place for showing hospitality. I planted all of these morning glories because my late wife liked them, and they do look beautiful when they bloom. They heal the hearts of those who see them. I'd like to hold tomorrow's tea ceremony in Sakyo's tea room."

Tsukasa immediately ran outside.

"Wait, Tsukasa!" Sakyo shouted, chasing after him.

The rest of us looked into the garden and saw Sakyo grabbing Tsukasa by the shoulders.

"Let go," Tsukasa said. "I already know dad is planning on announcing his heir at tomorrow's tea ceremony. I'm leaving this house."

"You keep talking about his heir, but what are they inheriting? This house? The Saito family name?"

"Everything!"

"That's too much for me," Sakyo said, spreading his arms.

Tsukasa gaped at him.

"It's probably too much for you too, Tsukasa. Same with Kazuhiko. The three of us don't have the caliber to succeed the Saito family name."

"Who's gonna do it, then?"

"I think dad already decided a long time ago based on intuition. Like, he probably looked at his three sons and thought, 'This isn't going to work.' That's why he named my son after the person he loves

and respects.”

“Rikyu, huh?” Tsukasa clicked his tongue.

“Yeah, I don’t think it’ll be for a while, but I think he was going to tell us at tomorrow’s tea ceremony that he’s considering making his grandson his successor instead of any of his sons.” Sakyo smiled.

“Hmph. If your son succeeds the Saito family, that’s an easy retirement for you.”

“No way, my son isn’t that nice.”

“Either way, I’m leaving. I’m dying of boredom out here in the sticks.”

“Sure, but at least show your face here every now and then. This is your father’s house, after all.” He patted his brother on the back.

“You’re staying here?”

“Yeah, dad’s disability makes bathing hard for him, and we can’t make Suzuki help with that too. And hey, even an unsuccessful day trader like me can have a roof over his head this way. This is what you call a win-win situation, right?” Sakyo grinned mischievously.

Tsukasa gave him an exasperated look. After some time, he murmured, “Well, take care of dad, bro.” Then he smiled gently in a way I hadn’t seen before.

“Yep, leave him to me. Apparently, I’m a pretty good caregiver.” Sakyo raised his fist lightheartedly. “Anyway, don’t be a killjoy by leaving right now. At least have a cup of tea with us first.”

Tsukasa nodded, looking like he was about to cry.

After that, we had a tea ceremony in Sakyo’s tea room. Ukon was the host, and Suzuki served as his assistant. Holmes was Ukon’s guest of honor, so he sat at the front of the line, followed by me, his companion. After me, the three family members sat in the order of their ages: Sakyo, Tsukasa, and lastly Rikyu. Although the last seat was considered the lowest-ranking guest, the person sitting there had to perform various tasks for the host, so it wouldn’t be good for a clueless person like me to be there either. I heard that for a beginner, it was best to be honest and say, “It’s my first time. Could you teach me what to do?” Kyoto people didn’t take kindly to those who pretended to know what they were doing, but they were very welcoming to those who were upfront and asked for help.

“Here you are,” Ukon said, giving Holmes a bowl of expensive Japanese sweets. They were in the shape of morning glories.

As the guest of honor, Holmes nodded to the rest of us and said, “Excuse me for partaking first.” He then lifted the bowl with both hands, bowed, and used the *kaishi* paper to pick up a sweet. Next it was my turn to do the same thing, followed by Sakyo and Tsukasa. The key point here was to finish eating the sweets before tea was

served. I watched Holmes finish his and ate my own with my toothpick. The refined sweetness and softness made me smile fondly.

After we finished eating, Ukon prepared the tea for us. Holmes again excused himself for going first and drank the tea using the method he had explained to me before. His movements were as elegant as always. I followed his example and drank my tea, which was very mellow and delicious.

“That reminds me, Sakyo said he liked Shikibu Izumi, right?” Holmes asked. It was now the time where we could have a friendly conversation.

“Yeah,” Sakyo said, nodding happily. “She had a lot of affairs while also being smart and charming enough to compose all of those poems... Huh, doesn’t that kind of sound like my ex-wife? You think so too, right, Rikyu?” He grinned at Rikyu.

“No one asked for that, dad,” Rikyu said coldly with a sigh. “Mom has the owner now, so get over it already.”

“I know. He’s a charming guy, so I don’t think I can win against him. But he’s already in his late seventies. In thirty years, Yoshie might be alone again,” Sakyo mused.

Holmes nodded. “It’s very likely that she will be. My grandfather is in good health for now, but he doesn’t lead a healthy lifestyle.”

In thirty years, the owner would be over a hundred. It’s a bit awkward to talk about him this way, but it’s true that there’s a high chance Yoshie will be single again. Oh—so that’s what Sakyo actually meant when he called the owner “really old.” He wasn’t implying that he was better because he was young. He meant there was a high chance the owner would pass away before him.

“It’s my dream to live with her again when that happens,” Sakyo murmured with an actual dreamy look in his eyes. Rikyu and Tsukasa’s eyes widened, and Holmes chuckled out loud.

“What’re you laughing about, Kiyo?” Rikyu asked.

“I just thought it was a wonderful mindset. I’m happy that Yoshie loves my grandfather, but I felt bad knowing that she would be alone again one day. So I’m glad that Sakyo feels that way. It’s a relief.”

“You don’t know how mom’s going to feel when that happens, though.”

“That’s true.”

Everyone laughed.

Like Rikyu said, no one knows how Yoshie’s heart will feel when the time comes. But if Sakyo’s heart hasn’t changed by then, I’m sure she’d be happy about it. Even if they don’t remarry, they can be good friends chatting over tea.

After tea, Holmes and I thanked the Saito family and left the estate. Most of the morning glories behind the house had been cut off, but the ones in front were safe and sound, much to my relief. However, the flowers were already shriveled up, as if they'd gone to sleep.

"Were these a sister species after all?" I asked.

"No, if you look closely, you can see the hairs on the leaves. I think they're morning glories," said Holmes.

"Do the other species not have hairs?"

"I believe that was the case. I'm not too knowledgeable in that field, though."

"No, you already know plenty." *He really does know everything...*
We walked to the car.

"How was your first tea ceremony?"

"It was nerve-racking, like I expected." I placed my hand on my chest. "But it was a great experience. A tea ceremony is a place for showing hospitality. The host uses a lot of care, right?"

"My grandfather often warns me that, 'Care isn't something to be used—it's something to be given.'"

"Huh?" I tilted my head, unsure of what he was trying to say.

"I'm not the best practitioner of it myself, but care is better 'given' than 'used.' When you use care, it tires both you and your company. Ideally, you want to be able to 'give' care instead."

"Now that you mention it, when people are considerate of me, sometimes it's tiring for me too. The owner isn't a considerate person, but I do think he's caring."

And like the owner says, Holmes is a considerate person through and through. But Holmes does it in a selfish way, so it's not tiring for me. "Using care" and "giving care"... They seem similar, but they might actually be very different. I nodded in understanding.

"Don't you agree that Sakyo isn't considerate, but he's naturally caring?" Holmes asked.

"Oh...you're right."

Sakyo wasn't the type to be considerate towards others, but there was something about him that made people feel comfortable. *That's what it means to be a caring person.* I thought back to the morning glories that Sakyo and Tsukasa each had in their alcoves. Sakyo had arranged his with the thought of entertaining his guests, but Tsukasa had only cared about being chosen. Thinking about it that way, the natural winner was obvious. Even though they had both used a single morning glory, the feelings that went into them were completely different.

Now that I think about it...how did Sen no Rikyu feel when he invited

Hideyoshi Toyotomi to his morning glory tea room? Was it really an insult, like Holmes said?

"Holmes," I said.

"Yes?" He looked down at me.

"What if Sen no Rikyu's tea room wasn't an insult but thoughtful advice?" Hideyoshi wouldn't have heeded a direct, verbal warning, after all. The tea room may have been a way to warn him without hurting his pride.

"I see." Holmes put his hand on his chin. "I'd expect no less from you, Aoi."

"Huh?"

"I have a warped nature, so there wasn't a doubt in my mind that it was an insult. But you can interpret it positively because you have an honest heart. I feel a bit sorry now," he said, nodding and folding his arms.

I blushed and shook my head. "No, it was just a thought that came to mind. We don't know the truth, after all."

"That's true. Thinking about it, Hideyoshi was also an incredibly smart and perceptive man. It's quite possible that he'd picked up on Sen no Rikyu's advice when he replied about admiring his aesthetic sense. But even if he accepted his respected friend's indirect advice, he would one day lose the ability to hear it. Well, as you said, we don't know the truth."

"Yeah." I chuckled.

"One day you won't be able to hear their advice anymore." That's something that can happen to anyone in any era. Even if the advice is for your own good, you can lose the ability to hear it. And because the advice is for your own good, it can sting you where it hurts the most. For better or worse, true feelings resonate deep within your heart.

"Holmes, I think today's tea ceremony gave me a firsthand lesson on the heart." I could feel that a lot of heart had gone into preparing the tea room, the sweets, and the tea. *It's that hospitality that makes the guests strive to behave appreciatively as well.*

Holmes smiled happily, and we slowly turned to look back at the house. That was the dazzling summer afternoon where I participated in my first tea ceremony.

Chapter 2: A House Built on Sand

1

I was able to make lots of memories with Holmes that summer. In July, we went to the Gion Festival and Shimogamo Shrine's Mitarashi Festival. In August, we went to see the fireworks show at Lake Biwa and Gozan no Okuribi, the five ceremonial bonfires.

"Gozan no Okuribi really has a special atmosphere," I said as we watched the bonfires from the Takano riverbed.

Holmes smiled in amusement. "Last year, you called it the Daimonji bonfires. You've become a real Kyoto resident, Aoi."

"That's because you corrected me."

We laughed as we walked along the riverside.

At the end of August, Holmes and I went to see the floating paper lanterns on the inlet at Takase River. I also helped out at my local Jizo Festival at my mother's request.

The Jizo Festival was held on and around August 24th. Typically, small celebrations were held around the Jizo statues found on street corners and whatnot. Since it was a festival for Jizo, the protector of children, the adults that lived in the area put up stalls with fun activities for kids, like water balloon fishing and ring toss. My mother was on the district board, so I got roped into helping.

Working as festival staff in the late summer heat was quite an ordeal but seeing the children's happy faces made all of my fatigue disappear. As staff, we took turns taking breaks, ate the curry that the district board members made for us, and had fun conversations. Holmes came to bring me refreshments, which caused a big commotion around us.

So ended my summer vacation, and then it was fall, which meant it was back to studying for entrance exams for me, and Holmes continued to help me as my tutor.

One mid-autumn day, a special program about appraising aired on TV. For a while after that, Kura was flooded with customers wanting their antiques appraised.

"Please appraise this plate."

"I brought a hanging scroll."

"Can you do my tea bowl next?"

It was probably a temporary spike in business, but it was a spike

nonetheless. On any normal day, there was no way customers would have to wait in line for an appraisal.

"The TV effect is incredible," I said, unable to hide my astonishment.

Holmes chuckled. "Even if it's temporary, I'm happy about it. That said, it seems like most of them only want to know how much their antiques are worth." He walked over to where the customers were waiting and sat down in front of the counter.

I felt conflicted. I could understand why a TV program made them curious about the value of their antiques at home, but it seemed sort of shameful.

Holmes put on his usual white gloves and began appraising the items. First was the customer with the plate. He stared intently at it and said, "This is in the style of Imari ware, but it's mass-produced and the design is printed on. I'd say it's worth...about a thousand yen."

"O-Only a thousand?" The customer's eyes widened. They looked back and forth between the plate and Holmes.

"Yes. The size makes it rather convenient, and it's a lovely color. Please use it well," Holmes said with a smile. He bowed to the customer as they walked away dumbfounded. "Next, please."

The next item was a hanging scroll.

"This is a replica made in the Showa period. I'd say it's worth around five thousand yen. It'd make a great interior decoration, so I encourage you to hang it in your alcove."

He moved briskly through the line.

"This is an imitation of a Shino tea bowl, not a real one. Oh, but authentic Shino tea bowls aren't something you can find easily."

The customers all slumped their shoulders in disappointment as they left the store.

"Is that appraiser trustworthy?"

"I heard he's Seiji Yagashira's grandson, but he's too young for this."

"I'm going to try another shop."

Holmes must be hearing what they're saying. How does he feel about it?

Then the door chime rang again.

"Welcome," I said. I looked up and it was Yoshie. "Oh, Yoshie! Wait..."

Her eyes were red and puffy. Holmes stood up, immediately noticing that something was wrong.

"What happened?" he asked gently.

Suddenly, Yoshie crouched down and broke down into tears.

"Yoshie?!" I asked.

“What on earth happened?” Holmes asked. “Please sit down.”
We quickly ran up to her and helped her make her way to the sofa.

2

When Yoshie had calmed down, Holmes brought us hot chocolate.
“Here you go.”

He must have thought that something sweet would help her relax.

“Thank you, Kiyotaka.” Yoshie sipped her drink, looking like she was still on the verge of tears.

“So, what happened?” Holmes asked again, sitting down across from her.

“W-Well...” Tears rose to her eyes once more.

“A-Are you okay, Yoshie?” I asked, panicking.

Holmes quietly waited for her to continue.

“You see...” she began.

Yoshie’s story was as follows: her period hadn’t come for about two months now, and she had secretly thought she might be pregnant. Even though there were risks associated with giving birth at her age, she’d wanted to have the child of the person she loved—but she hadn’t known if the owner would accept it.

I couldn’t contain my shock. *I mean, the owner’s in his late seventies. Is it even possible to conceive a child at that age?* Moreover, while I obviously knew that Yoshie and the owner were lovers, I thought it was more of a...spiritual thing. I didn’t realize it was a physical relationship too. I shook my head, not wanting to think about it too deeply.

Holmes, on the other hand, didn’t seem fazed. “And you went to the hospital today?” he asked softly.

“Yes, and they said my cycle was just irregular because of my age. I’m not pregnant.” She sniffed.

“Did that come as a shock to you?”

“W-Well, yes, but that was just the funny part of the story.”

Phew. So she wasn’t actually sobbing over that.

“So then I told Seiji what happened,” she continued. “I said my period hadn’t come in two months, and I thought I might be pregnant, but it turned out I’m just getting old. It’s a funny story, right? And then I asked, ‘What would you have done if I really was pregnant?’”

“Oh, I can see why you’d ask that,” I said. *If I were in her position, I would’ve asked too.*

“And Seiji said, ‘It’s the woman who struggles with either option, so I’d let you decide. I’d recognize the child as mine and provide support, and if you didn’t want to raise them, I’d take them in myself.’”

But I wouldn't be able to marry you." She sobbed again. "It was just a what-if scenario since I'm not actually pregnant, but he said it so strongly!"

I really sympathized with her. The owner might have said that because of how old he was, but it still would've been a shock to be told, "I won't marry you."

"And then I remembered...a rumor I heard about Seiji before," she said.

A rumor about the owner?

"I heard that he and his ex-wife, Tsubaki, separated in a horrible way. The public thinks his wife got fed up with his free-spirited nature and left him, but in reality, she was dying from an illness, and he shoved divorce papers at her, saying, 'I don't need a dying wife.' I couldn't believe the rumor when I heard it, but what if Seiji really does have that sort of attitude towards marriage?" She slumped forward onto the counter, bawling her eyes out.

Holmes looked at her with a pained expression. He'd told me before about the circumstances that had led to Tsubaki and the owner's divorce. I recalled what he'd said when we met her...

"First of all, I hear that the reason why my grandfather left you was because after you got married, he saw you ailing from an illness that wouldn't go away, and he thought he'd become a god of pestilence."

"Apparently a shaman told him in the past, 'Because you have defeated everything in your way and obtained all you could want, there is a potent karma swirling around you. However, you are under your ancestors' powerful protection, so no harm will befall you. Instead, all of the karma will go to your spouse.'"

"Don't worry—the story itself is nonsense. However, it's true that grandma could not recover from her disease. After giving birth to my father, she fell deathly ill. When my grandfather saw her suffering, he was convinced that he'd become a god of pestilence and resolved to leave her."

The story had come as a shock to me as well. *Come to think of it, Tsubaki had laughed and said, "Yes, but it was such a shock to receive his farewell letter and the divorce papers while I was being treated at my family's home. I think the anger sent my illness flying." The part about shoving divorce papers at her and saying, "I don't need a dying wife" was probably embellished by the rumors.*

"It's true, but it happened a bit differently," Holmes said. He told Yoshie the same story that he'd told me, about what the shaman had told the owner on his wedding day.

Because of that, he thought it was his own fault that Tsubaki was ill...

"My grandfather broke off his marriage with my grandmother

because he thought he'd become a god of pestilence. He was worried about what the shaman said. It was a false assumption, but after that, my grandmother did recover and become healthy. Because of that, my grandfather appears to have sworn not to marry again. Still, I thought he would've forgotten about the shaman's diagnosis a long time ago. Apparently, he's still letting it control him."

Holmes looked down with a sorrowful expression. Neither Yoshie nor I were able to say anything else.

3

After that, Yoshie staggered out of the store. Kura was again shrouded in silence. Her bawling and the owner's past had come as a great shock. It was too much to take in all at once.

Holmes took a deep breath and said, "At any rate, I was surprised when she said she might've been pregnant. I didn't know what I was going to do."

"Y-Yes, that was a surprise."

It was a bit of a relief to know that he'd been surprised too behind his calm face. I thought I was the only one who'd been flustered. *It has to be a shock when your grandparent has a baby. That said, it's strange for Holmes to say, "I didn't know what I was going to do." Was it so surprising for him because he's the owner's grandson?* I covered my mouth and giggled.

"If she really were pregnant and gave birth, I'd definitely be the one raising the child," he said, sighing deeply.

"Huh?"

"My grandfather and Yoshie are always traveling from place to place for work. They'd absolutely shove their baby at me, saying, 'Kiyotaka, babysit for us.' While I listened to Yoshie's story, I envisioned myself standing here in the store with a baby on my back and a bottle in one hand, and I felt faint and light-headed." He rested his chin in his hands, a distant look in his eyes.

He's right, now that he mentioned it. If those two really did have a baby, they would definitely make Holmes help them. The image of Holmes standing in the shop with a baby on his back was so easy to visualize that I burst out laughing. "Y-Yeah, they'd definitely make you babysit."

"Right? Even though my head was spinning, there was a part of me in the back of my mind that thought, 'I need to buy a book about childcare.'"

"You're pretty into the idea, huh?" *It's just like him to think that, though.*

"To be honest, I was also happy. It felt like I was getting a

younger brother, although he'd technically be my uncle."

"Your uncle!" *Right—if the owner had a son with Yoshie, that child would be Holmes's uncle.*

"When I heard she wasn't pregnant, I felt a bit relaxed, since I had run so many simulations in my head in that short period of time. And now I even feel a sense of loss." He smiled happily.

"Loss? So you *were* excited about the idea." I giggled. "Anyway, the owner sure is, uh, young," I murmured, finding it difficult to get the words out. *Why did I even say that out loud?* I blushed, suddenly overcome with embarrassment.

"My grandfather is...a monster, in many ways. That said, there are many men who have had children in their old age. Some famous examples would be Picasso, who had a child at the age of sixty-eight, and Fabre, who had one at seventy."

"But the owner is even older than that!"

"He is indeed."

As we were laughing together, the door chime rang again.

"Excuse me, I'd like to have something appraised," said the customer.

"Of course," Holmes replied. "Please have a seat here."

Another wave of customers, I thought as more people began coming in.

Once they were gone, Holmes leaned back in his chair and sighed. "It's hard to come across authentic works." Despite that, he looked like he was having fun.

"Has anyone brought in an authentic piece during this appraisal fad?" I asked as I cleaned up the counter.

"Yes, there was one. It was a shame, though."

"Huh?" I stopped and tilted my head.

"The other day, a customer brought in a Hozen Eiraku incense container and burner set in a wooden box. They were in the shape of cute baby turtles, but..."

Hozen Eiraku was a potter from the Edo period who had specialized in Kyo ware. He was one of the Ten Senke Artisans (an honorific title given to the ten craftsmen—such as lacquerers and woodworkers—who were involved in tea ceremonies and affiliated with the three Senke houses) and the eleventh generation of Zengoro, a line of potters who made earthenware tea stoves. Today, a single incense container by Hozen Eiraku could fetch around five hundred thousand yen.

"The container was real and the burner was fake," Holmes continued. "I imagine the turtle-shaped burner seemed to match Hozen's incense container to the untrained eye. Seeing them together in that beautiful box was a true shame. If only they'd both been real."

He slumped his shoulders.

"Yeah," I said with a laugh. "It's disappointing when people bring in counterfeits, isn't it?"

"No, I wouldn't say it's disappointing. I *do* get excited when they bring in something real, though. It's only natural, because authentic works of art rarely show up." He sipped his coffee, which must've been cold by then.

"Oh," I said. I decided to ask him something I'd always wondered about. "Why do you perform appraisals for free, Holmes?" Most places charged for professional appraisals. Basically, Holmes was working pro bono.

"I do it because I'm only halfway to becoming a professional. Examining many things is part of my training. Ninety percent of the things brought into this store are fake, which is why I'm so happy when I encounter something real. I enjoy it, so even if I did become a full-fledged appraiser, I'd probably still do it for free. And most of all, I want people to feel free to visit and see the antiques." He smiled gently.

This aspect of him hasn't changed since the day I met him.

"Isn't it frustrating when people don't believe you?" I asked hesitantly.

His eyes widened. "No. It's to be expected."

"Is it?"

"It's understandable that they wouldn't take a student's appraisals seriously. Most people don't believe me. They go to other appraisers afterwards, and some of them come back here to tell me I was right all along. I simply give them my appraisal regardless of whether they believe me or not."

"Holmes..." I murmured, moved.

The sound of applause came from the direction of the door.

Who could that be? I didn't sense anyone, and the door chime didn't ring. Confused, I looked towards the door and saw a man in a hat and suit. He was holding the door chime so that it wouldn't ring.

"Nice speech there, Holmes of Kyoto," he said with a grin.

My body tensed, and I saw Holmes's eyebrow twitch. It was his rival: the genius counterfeiter, Ensho.

"Well, if it isn't Ensho. What brings you here?"

The warm air in the store seemed to freeze in an instant. Holmes placed his hands on the counter and stood up in a relaxed manner. There was no trace of a smile left on his face—his expression sent chills down my spine.

"Don't make that scary face," Ensho said, grinning. "I'm here to ask for an appraisal." He took off his hat, revealing his shaved head. He held something wrapped in cloth in his left hand. In the midst of

the tense atmosphere, he sat down on the sofa in front of the counter without waiting for permission. "I want you to look at this." He put the item on the counter.

Holmes said nothing and sat down in the chair again. He had a skeptical look on his face as he put his gloves on.

The store fell silent. The only thing I heard was my pounding heart. Holmes and Ensho sat across the counter from each other. *I never expected to be able to witness this sight.* It was the sixth confrontation between the young genius appraiser and the genius counterfeiter.

Holmes carefully unwrapped the cloth, revealing a small box that seemed like it'd contain a tea bowl. He opened the lid, and his eyes widened. Inside was a smooth, round piece of white porcelain, small enough to fit snugly in the palm of one's hand. It was very simple, but that simplicity reminded me of the owner's prized Chinese celadon, which was called an utmost treasure.

"It's...a white porcelain incense container." Holmes gulped. Incense containers were used to store the incense to be burned in a tea ceremony room.

"Yeah, from the Joseon dynasty. Gonna take a look at it for me?" Ensho smiled fearlessly.

"Joseon white porcelain..." I murmured. Suddenly, I remembered what had happened at the Saito estate in Takagamine. Ensho had frozen upon discovering one of the Saito family's treasures—a small white porcelain pot. Later, when Ukon had asked what we thought the most valuable object in the house was, Ensho had mumbled "the white porcelain" as his answer. *Maybe he reacted that way because he had white porcelain too.*

"The Joseon dynasty began in 1392 and flourished for five hundred years," Holmes explained. "White porcelain was the favorite form of pottery during that time. It was once designated for the king's use, and it was controlled strictly so that ordinary civilians couldn't use it. However, as Confucianism became more widespread, porcelain vessels were allowed to be made in large quantities for ceremonial use."

This porcelain was loved by a prosperous dynasty. It must be so valuable that you almost never come across authentic pieces.

"You can ramble on about anything, eh? Ever the knowledgeable one." Ensho laughed mockingly.

It didn't seem like his taunt reached its target's ears. Holmes stared intently at the incense container and took off his gloves.

"Why're you taking your gloves off?" Ensho asked curiously.

Holmes said nothing. He was still focused on the appraisal. He'd told me before that when a "serious" appraisal is needed for ceramics,

the gloves are taken off. This incense container must've been valuable enough to warrant that. Ensho shrugged, crossed his arms, and watched him intently.

The Joseon white porcelain that Ensho brought in... Is it real? Or is it an elaborate forgery by this genius counterfeiter?

The store was filled with a tremendous amount of tension. How much time had passed? It must've only been a few minutes, but it felt like a very long time. Holmes continued to stare at the incense container. Not a single word was spoken. The silence was terrifying.

After some time, he closed his eyes and opened his mouth, saying, "It's real. It must've been fired in one of the royal porcelain furnaces in Gwangju, Korea." His voice was quiet but clear. He'd determined it to be real.

Ensho's eyes widened for a second. Then he simply laughed in amusement, arms still crossed. Holmes narrowed his eyes in suspicion but said nothing.

Ensho stopped laughing, leaned forward, and peered into Holmes's face. He was so close that the tips of their noses were almost touching.

"Too bad, Mr. Holmes," he said. "That's a fake."

I gasped and immediately put my hand over my mouth—my first instinct had been to scream. Holmes, however, remained calm.

"That's a counterfeit I made," Ensho continued.

Holmes said nothing. He put the incense container into the wooden box, neatly rewrapped it in the cloth, and handed it back to Ensho. "Regardless of your claim, I've given you my appraisal," he said with a firm gaze.

Ensho's face twitched but only for a moment. He quickly put on his usual grin and said, "You're a real sore loser, eh? Well, whatever. Thanks." He took the wrapped box, stood up, pulled his hat down over his eyes, and left the store. By the time the door chime stopped ringing, he was out of sight.

The air in the store was still tense, and my heart was still pounding. Holmes silently put his gloves in his inner pocket.

"U-Um, Holmes..."

"That was real," he said, as if sensing my confusion. "I don't know what Ensho was thinking when he said that, but it was undeniably real. No matter how much of a genius he is, it's simply impossible for it to be a fake," he declared coldly.

I fell silent. I could tell that he wasn't lying or being a sore loser. He was confident in his appraisal.

But what if Ensho did make something truly convincing? I've seen his acts of genius before. This time, he might've finally created something good enough to deceive Holmes. But if that's the case, he didn't seem as happy

as I would've expected. When Holmes said it was real, he looked a bit surprised. Was he disappointed that Holmes couldn't see through his forgery?

But at the same time, I can't imagine Holmes ever getting an appraisal wrong. So it was genuine. But why would Ensho call a real antique a counterfeit? Actually, forget it. He isn't the kind of person who'd ever fall into my realm of understanding.

I was extremely uneasy. A bad feeling was spreading in my chest, and I lowered my eyes. The mirror in the store reflected the pained expression on my face.

4

About a month passed. It was now December, and everyone in class was even more focused on entrance exams than before. I'd gotten used to the strained atmosphere.

"Hey, Aoi, are you going to Kura cram school today?" Kaori asked me after school, picking up her bag. "Kura cram school" is what we called it when I went to Kura for tutoring rather than work.

"Yeah, Holmes was at university today, but he said he'd be at the store after 4 p.m."

"Must be nice, having an exclusive private tutor who's a grad student at Kyoto U."

"Y-Yeah, pretty much."

We left the classroom. As usual, I went to the bicycle parking area, got my bike, and walked it outside the school gate. Our school allowed us to have cellphones, but we weren't permitted to use them inside. Since I couldn't use my phone anyway, I always kept it turned off.

I reached into my bag to get my phone with the intention of texting Holmes, "I'm on my way to the store now."

"Aoi," called a voice in a tone just like Holmes's. Surprised, I instinctively smiled happily and looked up—but immediately calmed down upon realizing that the voice itself sounded completely different. *How could I mistake the voice for his when it sounded so different? Is it because the tone was exactly the same?*

The person standing there wasn't Holmes. It was Ensho. I was too shocked to speak. My eyes opened wider than they ever had before.

"Was it that similar?" Ensho asked with an amused chuckle.

I stood still, not saying anything.

"Something like this happened before, right?" he continued.

It had. The first time I'd gone to the Saito estate in Takagamine, Ensho had mimicked Holmes, and I'd completely fallen for it. Back then, I'd stood completely still in shock, the same way I was doing

now.

Ensho was wearing a jacket, jeans, and a cap. He gave off a completely different aura.

“Isn’t that guy kinda hot?” whispered the schoolgirls passing by.

Oh, so normal people see Ensho as a “kinda hot” guy. I feel nothing but terror, though. Why is he here? I wanted to ask, but the words wouldn’t come out. I could only stare at him.

“Please don’t make that scary face, Aoi,” he said, placing a hand on his chest. His tone of voice and mannerisms were such a perfect replication of Holmes’s that chills ran down my spine.

“Oh, I must have scared you too much. Sorry.” This time he spoke in a standard Japanese dialect with perfect intonation.

I shuddered. *But I much prefer this over copying Holmes.* “What do you need?” I asked, finally finding my voice.

“Well, you looked like you couldn’t accept how that all turned out, so I thought you might wanna know the truth.” Now he was back to his usual Kansai accent.

The truth... He’s talking about the white porcelain.

“I’m not gonna take you anywhere sketchy,” he continued. “You can keep your distance too. How about we talk in that park over there? It’s got a good view, and there are kids and housewives there too.” He pointed at a nearby park surrounded by houses.

5

In the park, small children were playing on the swings and in the sandbox while their mothers watched over them. There was a Jizo shrine at one end—something that had surprised me when I’d moved to Kyoto was that every park had one. It was normal for Jizo statues to protect the children in the parks here, and the deity had a summer festival dedicated to him.

Oh yeah, I helped with the Jizo festival last summer, I thought absentmindedly as I looked at the shrine in the park.

Ensho and I were sitting on opposite ends of a bench, and both of us had yet to say anything. Even though alarm bells were going off somewhere in my head, I had ended up here with him.

“Sure is warm today,” he said, looking up and squinting at the bright sky. He was still wearing his cap. The rest of his clothes were normal too, so he really looked like a regular guy. “Truth is, there was something else I wanted to ask Mr. Holmes for that day, not just the appraisal,” he murmured to himself.

He had a request? I was confused, but I didn’t think he was lying. Ensho had visited Kura out of the blue. It was possible that he did have a request for Holmes.

“What was your request?” I asked softly.

“It’s a secret,” he said with a mischievous grin. *He really does have a completely different aura.*

The park was filled with the innocent voices of children, relieving the tension that was building up. Ensho watched them from afar with a content smile. I found that strange.

Come to think of it, Holmes and Ensho both grew up without a mother. They also both grew up in an environment immersed in art. Maybe they really were mirror images of each other, both raised in a unique setting with their unique talents.

“Well, unlike Mr. Holmes, I only had a lousy father,” Ensho said with a dry smile.

It was as if he could read my mind, just like Holmes, and I shuddered. I thought I’d gotten used to Holmes figuring out what I was thinking, but it was scary coming from Ensho. *He’s not normal either.* I felt like I now understood why Kaori often called Holmes “scary.”

The all-too-normal atmosphere that Ensho had created now seemed like it had simply been part of his plan. I clenched my fists tightly. *If I don’t focus, I’ll get dragged along with him.*

“So, um...what was the truth?” I asked, looking at him with a firm gaze.

He chuckled and took a wooden box out of his sling bag. “You’ll know when you look at this.” He held it in front of me, presumably wanting me to look inside.

The box wasn’t big. In terms of antiques, it could have held a small dish.

I hesitantly took it and opened the lid. “This is...”

Inside was a white porcelain incense container, cruelly broken in half. I stared at it wordlessly.

“I don’t need it anymore, so I broke it,” Ensho said with a twisted grin.

“I don’t need it anymore, so I broke it.” Is he saying that he doesn’t need the counterfeit he made anymore because Holmes failed to expose it? Or...

“No,” I said confidently. “This isn’t the white porcelain you brought in.”

Ensho looked surprised. After a few moments, he asked, “How’d you know?” His eyes were wide open in disbelief.

“It’s obvious at a glance. This isn’t the same white porcelain.”

I could tell that it had been made to look similar, but the luster, texture, and the aura it exuded were all different.

One time, there’d been a party at the Yagashira residence where a commotion had broken out because the prized celadon piece had been

shattered. The owner had immediately declared that it was a fake, and at the time, I'd been really impressed. But now, I understood exactly how he'd felt. *It's so different.*

Ensho fell silent for a short time before chuckling and saying, "A connoisseur's girlfriend's got sharp eyes too, eh? Not bad for a high school girl. That's a forgery I bought in China."

So I was right. Then what about the white porcelain he brought in that day?

"This time, you aren't denying it when I call you his girlfriend." He peered into my face, and I recoiled slightly. He was referring to when we had last met at the Saito estate, which was before I'd started dating Holmes. Ensho had mistaken me for Holmes's girlfriend, and I'd frantically denied it.

"Oh, so you really weren't going out back then, but now you are?" he continued.

I blushed.

"Hey, did Mr. Holmes fall in love with your keen eyes?"

"N-No, I don't think it was that," I said weakly, looking down. *He often tells me that I have good eyes, though. Was that part of it?*

"Why'd you pick him, anyway? Isn't he a real weirdo? Is it because he's rich, educated, and good-looking?"

"N-No, that's not it either..."

I had always admired Holmes's stylish looks, but I hadn't fallen in love with him just because of his appearance. If it were only a matter of looks, Akihito and Rikyu were good-looking too. *Why was I attracted to Holmes? Right, I know why.*

"We can show each other our weaknesses and embarrassing sides."

The first time I visited Kura, I broke down into tears, and Holmes warmly accepted me. Back then, I was really ugly and helpless. I was so consumed by jealousy and hatred that I could only think about myself. I was stiff and narrow-minded. Holmes was the one who saved me from that situation, and perhaps because I'd shown him my ugly side first, he showed me his weaknesses too. Maybe that's why we were drawn to each other—we could laugh together without having to pretend to be people we weren't. That's why...

"I love all of his weaknesses, his competitive and childish sides, his quirks, and his slight eccentricities."

After saying that, I came back to my senses. *Why am I telling Ensho this?* My cheeks suddenly felt hot.

He grinned in amusement as if he'd read my mind. "Hey, you're still a virgin, right?" he asked boldly.

I choked on my breath. *Why does he always say these things? I should really report him for sexual harassment.*

“I said it before, but I’m serious this time,” he continued. “That egotistical guy must care about you a whole lot if he’s keeping his hands off you.”

I looked down in embarrassment—and gasped when his hand touched my chin. He held it firmly and peered into my face.

“I wonder what face he’ll make if I defile you.” He put on a twisted sneer, right in front of my eyes.

I wanted to shove his hand away, but I couldn’t move. I felt like a frog being stared down by a snake. Too stiff to move, all I could do was stare back at him. His long, cold fingers wrapped around my jaw, sending chills down my spine. Though his mouth was in the shape of a smile, it didn’t reach his light brown eyes in the slightest.

When people are faced with true fear, they freeze.

Suddenly—“Aoi!”—Holmes’s voice rang through the park, bringing me back to my senses. I turned in the direction of the voice and saw Holmes hurrying towards us.

“Oh, now that’s a scary face,” Ensho said with an amused laugh.

Without saying a word, Holmes raised his fist to hit Ensho, who instantly grabbed me by the wrist and yanked me into a standing position in front of him, using me as a shield. Holmes’s fist stopped mere millimeters in front of my face. I even felt the wind from the force.

“Stopped just in the nick of time, hmm?” Ensho said mockingly in a forced Kyoto accent. “It’s a good thing you didn’t hit your girlfriend. Violence is never the answer, Mr. Holmes.” He grabbed my shoulders, laughed happily, then let go and jumped back.

“Why, you!”

I’d never seen Holmes look so angry before. He was about to chase after Ensho, who was trying to make a quick escape—but my legs gave out, and I sat down on the spot.

“Are you all right, Aoi?!” Holmes immediately took my hand.

I was so happy that he’d taken my hand instead of running after Ensho. So happy that it brought tears to my eyes. I’d been so nervous and scared that now I couldn’t stop shaking.

Holmes knelt in front of me and ran his hands along my cheeks, arms, and back, checking for injuries. “Are you really okay? Did he do anything bad to you?” he asked hurriedly with a serious look in his eyes.

I was so overwhelmed that all I could do was nod. He still looked worried, though, so I gulped down my breath and forced out the words, “I-I’m okay. He didn’t do anything to me.”

His tense face relaxed slightly. “Thank goodness. Really, thank goodness.” He brought me into a gentle embrace.

“Holmes...” I wrapped my hands around his back and clung tightly

to him. Released from my tension, I burst into tears. *I'm okay. But what would've happened if Holmes hadn't come? Ensho's eyes were really scary.*

We stayed like that for a while, and as soon as I calmed down, I started to wonder, *why is Holmes here to begin with?*

Holmes, reading my mind as usual, let go of me and sighed. "Ensho called the store and said, 'I'm about to go on a date with your girlfriend.' It was right before you got out of school, so..."

That means Ensho probably came to me as a way of messing with Holmes. Maybe he wanted the satisfaction of seeing Holmes panic.

I'd always wondered why Ensho did such things, but after seeing his eyes just now, I understood. *He's hopelessly jealous of Holmes.* They were both raised by their fathers, without a mother's warmth, in an art-specialized environment. They were both born with unique talents. Even though they had so many similarities, they ended up very different. Holmes had his share of hardships, but he was loved by everyone and walked in the sun. Meanwhile, Ensho never had a choice but to live in the shadows.

Perhaps it had started when he'd taken an interest in the young man who'd exposed his forgery. But after learning about Holmes and interacting with him, he questioned why they were so different despite being so similar, and it turned into *jealousy bordering on hatred.*

That's what it felt like to me.

6

After that, we sat there on the bench for a while. Holmes didn't ask me what Ensho and I had talked about, but I took it upon myself to relay the entire exchange to him. I didn't think I'd be able to relax unless we talked about something, and this felt like something that had to be told right away.

Holmes listened in silence with a conflicted expression on his face. After some time, he said, "Aoi, please leave your bike at school today and go home by taxi. I'll get you a ticket to pay with." He stood up.

I don't think Ensho will approach me again today, but I guess he wants to play it safe. Normally I would've said, "It's okay." But today, I couldn't even act tough. I nodded obediently.

We went to my school, and I parked my bicycle there again. Then we walked down the road towards a major street so that we could hail a cab.

The air around us was heavy. Holmes spoke much less than usual. The houses around us were decorated for Christmas, but it didn't match my state of mind at all, so I grimaced and looked down.

I glanced sideways at Holmes. His face was so expressionless that

it felt cold. He must've been angry with Ensho—or maybe he was angry with me too. *I let Ensho trick me into following him.*

"Aoi," he murmured after some time.

I flinched and looked up at him.

"Please don't come to the store for a while," he said in a monotone voice.

I lowered my eyes, unable to say anything. *I was afraid he'd say something like that. Our "Kura cram school" ends pretty late, and it wouldn't be reasonable for him to accompany me home every time.*

"Until when?" I asked quietly.

Holmes stopped walking half a step ahead of me. A cold wind blew through the small, empty road.

"This...is not going to work," he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent.

"Huh?"

"Aoi."

"Y-Yes?"

Holmes took a deep breath and turned around. "Let's break up," he said with a cold, listless look in his eyes. There was no light in those eyes, as if they were devoid of emotion.

My knees trembled. "What do you mean by that?" My heart was pounding furiously.

"I mean it literally. Let's stop dating." He looked me firmly in the eye and smiled self-deprecatingly.

My heart rate quickened even more, and it became difficult to breathe. It was obvious why he'd say such a thing. "Is that to protect me from Ensho?" I asked, even though I already knew.

Holmes narrowed his eyes. "Yes, but I'm also tired of this."

"Huh?"

He let out a long breath. "I'm disillusioned with you for following such a dangerous man. If I always have to be worrying about keeping you out of harm's way, my nerves aren't going to last. If I'm the only target, then I can handle anything he throws my way." He chuckled. "Besides, I didn't actually plan on continuing this relationship for a long time. You're a high school girl, so I thought it'd last a year or two at most. In that case, wouldn't this be a good time to end it? Now that this has happened, we can't keep pretending to be in a fun relationship." He looked down on me. "Right?"

I stared at him in silence. My hair fluttered in the cold, dry wind that blew between us.

Holmes ground his back teeth for a second since I still wasn't saying anything. "It works out for you too, doesn't it? We haven't slept together, so you aren't 'defiled goods' yet," he said with a twisted smile.

Silence.

"In that case, please defile me," I said, looking straight at him.

"Huh?" He blinked.

"I don't want it to 'work out' for me. If you want to temporarily distance yourself from me because it's dangerous right now, I'm okay with that. But I don't want to break up. If you *really* want to break up with me, then fine; it's not like I can stop you. But in that case, please listen to my request too. Turn me into, as you said, 'defiled goods.'"

He looked at me, eyes wide open.

"Please sleep with me, Kiyotaka. I decided long ago that you would be my first," I said in a quiet yet strong tone.

"Aoi..." he murmured, dumbfounded. The calm expression he'd maintained up until now crumbled, and tears welled up in his eyes. "Why are you saying that? You know how I feel," he said sadly, putting his hand over his face to hide his tears. I could still see them flowing down his cheeks, though, and my heart ached.

I'm sorry, Holmes. I know.

Holmes was trying his best to make me hate him. He picked what would be the worst possible time and said the cruelest things he could think of. He tried so hard, but his feelings were clear as day. He wanted me to say "I hate you!" and leave.

I always thought you were an incredible liar. I thought you were a cunning person with a tough side. But in reality, you're clumsy and terrible at lying.

My tears wouldn't stop.

Ensho's reason-defying hatred isn't something that can be stopped. Pretending to break up isn't going to convince him. That's why you determined that the safest way was to truly cut ties with me. You're trying desperately to protect me, just like when the owner said his farewells to his bedridden wife. I understand completely, to the point where it hurts.

"Aoi..." He gently pulled me by the hand into a firm embrace. "I'm serious. Let's break up." He was still crying.

I shook my head in his chest like a spoiled child. "Then...listen to my request."

"You understand, right? Don't do this to me."

"No," I whimpered. All I could do was shake my head.

He hugged me tightly, to the point where I could hardly breathe.

"Thank you for everything, Aoi. I truly loved you."

His pained words stabbed me in the heart. He was trying to put our relationship in the past.

I wanted to say "No, don't say that," but only sobs came out of my mouth.

We cried and held each other. I understood that Holmes was seriously trying to make this our last moment together.

A relationship between a man and a woman is so fragile, I thought as I cried. A few words and it's gone, like a house built on sand...

Chapter 3: The Curse That Dwells in Words

1

Two months later, I was going about my life as usual, as if everything had been a dream. Between school and home, nothing had changed. Life was peaceful.

The only difference was that I wasn't going to Kura. I told my friends and family that I was taking a long-term break from work to focus on entrance exams, so no one was worried about me. I didn't cry or grieve. Instead, I immersed myself in my studies as if trying to escape. Some people are negatively affected by a heartbreak before exams, but in my case, it might've been a good thing. When I concentrated on studying, I didn't have to remember the pain. I studied and studied, trying not to think about anything else.

"Hey, I heard that Holmes isn't at the store these days," said Kaori, coming up to my desk. It was lunch break at school.

"Huh?"

"Sis went to Kura yesterday and Rikyu was there instead. She said they talked about how Holmes hasn't been coming to the store."

Rikyu's been helping out ever since I started focusing on entrance exams, so that part isn't strange. But why isn't Holmes going there? I hope it's only because of university, but...

I had a bad feeling about this.

"And he's been in Hyogo this whole time," Kaori continued.

My eyes widened. "Hyogo?" *Why would he be in another prefecture?*

"Oh, you didn't know?"

"N-No."

"Maybe it's work-related."

"It probably is."

"You think so?"

We moved on to other topics. TV shows, entrance exams, all sorts of things. But I didn't tell her that Holmes had broken up with me. Not just Kaori—I hadn't told anyone. I knew that everyone had their own opinions of Holmes, and since I understood his feelings very well, I didn't want anyone to say anything at the moment. I didn't want their consolation.

Besides, I hadn't even accepted the breakup when he had practically forced me to get into the cab. Remembering that day made my heart ache. I knew I was struggling in vain. It was because the moment I said it out loud to someone, the breakup would become real. I was just refusing to admit it. That was why I went about my day trying not to look back on our memories together.

Despite that, whenever I let down my guard, those memories would vividly cross my mind. *The gentle smile he always showed me. The time he rescued me on the night of the Gion Festival. All of the times he helped me. The time when I tried to confess to him, but he interrupted me with an embrace, saying, "I love you." Our first kiss. The happy times we shared together at Kura. The taste of the coffee he brewed...*

I felt like crying whenever I remembered, but I held back with all my might. I didn't want to immerse myself in those memories, so I shook my head to send them away.

But if I continue to never see him, will our relationship really end this way, as if nothing happened?

After school, I walked my bike out of the school gate and turned on my phone as usual. Every time I picked up my phone, I secretly hoped that there'd be a message from Holmes.

I saw that I had no new messages, sighed, and shoved my phone back into my pocket. I looked up on a whim and saw a Valentine's Day poster in a sweets shop.

Oh right, it's already February.

Suddenly, my phone rang in my pocket. Startled, I took it out and looked at the screen—it was a call from Kura. My heart leaped.

"H-Hello?" I squeaked.

"Hello, Aoi. It's been a while." It was a gentle, nostalgic voice.

"Y-Yes, it has."

"I'm sorry for the sudden call. Could we meet today, if you're free?" he asked softly.

"Yes." I gulped, bewildered.

2

The meeting place was a cafe on the Kyoto University campus. I'd had lunch there with Holmes on several occasions.

After the phone call, I biked to the university, parked my bike near the cafe, and walked across the spacious campus. It was just before 5 p.m., and the sun was beginning to set. The cold wind stung my cheeks.

"Aoi," said the familiar voice.

I looked up and saw the manager. He was wearing a Burberry coat

and carrying his usual bag.

“Manager...”

“Sorry to call you here out of the blue.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay.”

The manager was the one who had called me from Kura. Even though I’d known it was him right away, his voice over the phone sounded very similar to Holmes’s, so for a split second, I’d been shocked—and overjoyed. It made me realize just how much I’d been hoping for Holmes to contact me.

“I’m glad you seem to be doing well,” he said, smiling. Behind his glasses, there was a kind look in his eyes. His elegant, gentle aura and mannerisms really were similar to Holmes.

I’m glad you seem to be doing well. I couldn’t say anything in response to that, so I gave him a vague smile and looked down.

“Oh, I know you’re only putting on a brave face. What I meant was that I’m glad you’re still riding your bike and going to school. There’s somewhere I’d like to take you today,” he said, starting to walk. The way he moved quickly yet calmly once again resembled Holmes. “It’s this way. You might be surprised by how many people are there, though.”

When we exited through the gate, there were a startling number of people outside. Most of them were with their families. Many stalls lined the street, making for a lively atmosphere. I could see a large vermilion torii gate in the direction we were heading.

I didn’t know there was a shrine so close to Kyoto U. And this must be... “Is this a festival?”

“Yes, there’s a shrine over there called Yoshida Shrine. This is their busiest festival of the year, the Setsubun Festival.”

“Setsubun...” *Right, it’s February. This is when Setsubun is held.*

I stared absentmindedly at the torii gate.

“Let’s drive away your misfortune, Aoi.” The manager smiled at me.

Oh, right. Setsubun is a day for driving away misfortune and bringing in good luck. I looked at the manager’s gentle smile and teared up. “Okay. Thank you for inviting me.” *I didn’t think I wanted anyone to say anything. I didn’t even want their consolation. But right now, I’m so happy that I could cry.*

We joined the crowd and climbed the stairs to the main shrine building. It was definitely a mountaintop shrine.

“Let’s see... Yoshida Shrine guards Kyoto from the northeast, which is said to be an unlucky direction. It was built in the era of Heian-kyo, making it a very old and venerable shrine. Farther up, we have Daigengu, where all of the deities in the country are enshrined.”

“That’s incredible. You know a lot too, huh?”

“Not at all. I thought it’d be embarrassing if I couldn’t explain it as well as Kiyotaka, so I did some research beforehand. Even though I’m a Kyoto U alumnus, I’ve only come here a handful of times. I was actually surprised by how amazing this shrine was when I did my research. Oh, and I prepared a cheat sheet too,” he said, taking a notepad out of his pocket. “Apparently, this was built in the year 859 CE.”

“Oh, jeez.” I couldn’t help but laugh.

We entered the main grounds, and the first thing I noticed was a sign that said “Prize Display Area.”

What’s that?

I took a peek and saw everything from stuffed animals to a car on display. Nearby, something called Setsubun lucky beans were being sold, and people were lining up to buy them.

“Do those beans bring good luck?” I asked.

“Those are lottery tickets. See, you can win the prizes over there.”

“Wait, does that mean the car is a prize too?”

“Yes, it’s the top prize. The winning lottery numbers are published in the newspaper. They have a lot of different prizes, and it’s a lot of fun, so I encourage you to enter.”

“Okay!”

The lucky beans cost two hundred yen each, so I decided to buy five for the time being. But before I could pay, the manager swept in and did it for me.

“Th-Thank you.”

Once again, I was reminded of how similar Holmes and the manager were. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that Holmes was greatly influenced by his father. *If you add the owner’s taste to the manager’s gentleness and style, you get Holmes.*

After leaving the bustling main shrine, we continued up the mountain to Daigengu. The uphill path created the same kind of sacred atmosphere that I remembered feeling at Mount Kurama. And since it was so festive, the sight of mask-wearing people climbing the mountain with us felt mystical, to the point where I wondered if any non-human beings had blended into the crowd to enjoy the event.

Daigengu Shrine was a hexagonal room behind the octagonal main shrine. Even though it was ancient, its shape made it feel novel and mysterious. Surrounding it were the shrines of all of the deities from across the country.

“People who know their stuff consider this an extremely lucky shrine,” said a nearby voice.

“Oh, I think I know what you mean,” said another.

I almost nodded in agreement. It was hard to explain in words, but this shrine was brimming with a special energy that made me feel

just how incredible it was. I faced it and clapped my hands.

What should I pray for? I feel like I'll cry if I ask for something seriously. What I wanted the most was to see Holmes again. Come to think of it, Holmes once said that you aren't supposed to "ask" for anything at shrines. It's better to make a statement as if your wish has already come true and give thanks. That way, the gods will hurry to grant it. It was a bit of a funny tip.

I was able to see Holmes again without any distress. Thank you very much.

It was kind of a depressing prayer, but my heart felt a bit lighter after saying it.

3

After leaving Yoshida Shrine, the manager took me to a cafe of his choosing near Kyoto University. I expected it to be an old-fashioned coffeehouse, but it was actually very trendy.

"I didn't know you went to places like this, Manager."

"Since you're with me, I thought I'd choose a shop that girls would like," he said gently.

We sat at a corner table by the window and ordered coffee. Bossa nova music was playing in the background. There weren't many customers, and it was mostly couples.

I wonder how we look. I'm still wearing my school uniform, so maybe we look like father and daughter? If we seem suspicious, I'd feel terrible for him.

Despite my fears, all of the other customers were focused on the people they were with. No one paid any attention to us.

Before long, our coffee arrived.

"Thank you," I murmured, sipping it without adding any milk or sugar.

"Oh, you can drink your coffee black now, right?"

"Yes. I started doing it last year. I had to force myself at first, but now I can enjoy the taste."

Especially after breaking up with Holmes, I couldn't bring myself to drink anything sweet. Café au lait and hot chocolate both brought forth nice memories. Bitter black coffee felt perfect for my broken heart.

Maybe I really am growing up. If this counts as a failed love, then it's the second time. Thinking about it, I thought I was really heartbroken when my previous boyfriend broke up with me, but now I think I had it easier back then. All I had to do was hold a grudge and lament about my woes. I was the pitiful, tragic heroine, and that was enough.

Meanwhile, this failed love isn't anyone's fault. As much as I want to

resent Ensho for causing it, I can't bring myself to do that either. Deep in his eyes, past the jealousy bordering on hatred, I'd seen something resembling indescribable anguish. After witnessing that, I could no longer blame him. So, with no one to take out these feelings on, I simply suffer. If I were to blame anyone, it'd be myself for carelessly following Ensho. For some inexplicable reason, I couldn't defy him.

How easy would it be if I could push all of my resentment onto someone else? Holmes must've wanted that for me. That's why he tried so hard to make me hate him.

I took another sip of the coffee and sighed as I stared absentmindedly out the window.

"Aoi."

"Y-Yes?" I hurriedly looked back at the manager.

"Could you tell me what happened between you and Kiyotaka?" he asked softly.

That was a bit of a surprise. *He doesn't know anything?*

"What did Holmes say?" I asked.

"Nothing. All he said was, 'Aoi won't be coming to the store anymore.'"

"I see."

"I wanted to ask him about it, but it didn't seem like I could. His whole body gave off an aura that said, 'Don't ask.'"

I think I know what he means.

"Then he holed himself up in the Yagashira estate and started researching something like a man possessed. One day, he suddenly said, 'I'm going to Hyogo, so watch the store for me,' and left the house."

"How did he seem at the time?"

"Hmm, he was worn out, but there was strength in his eyes. Maybe he was on to something."

Something... Is there something in Hyogo? I thought for a minute. *Oh right, Ensho said he was from Amagasaki. Did Holmes find out something about him?*

"Did Kiyotaka distance himself from you because of the Yagashira family's curse?"

I widened my eyes at the sudden question. "Huh? The...what?"

"Oh, my apologies. Did he distance himself from you without telling you why?"

I became increasingly confused. "Um...there's a reason it turned out like this..." I still didn't know what the manager was talking about, but I explained everything to him. I didn't hesitate to tell him about what had occurred with Ensho. If anything, I felt like it was my duty to tell him.

He nodded after I finished. "So that's what happened."

“Um, what was that curse you were talking about?” I asked fearfully, unconsciously leaning forward.

“Do you know why my father got divorced, Aoi?”

I nodded, still confused. “Yes, the owner thought he’d become a god of pestilence and left his bedridden wife, right?”

“Yes. Do you know why he thought that?”

Why? He must be talking about that story.

“A shaman said so?” I answered hesitantly.

The manager lowered his eyes. “Yes. In the past, a curse was placed on my father.”

“A curse...” I could feel my expression turning grim at the ominous word.

“My father graduated from Kyoto U too,” the manager said, looking out the window at the main university building.

I nodded. *That I knew. Holmes said he always wanted to go to Kyoto U because the owner and manager graduated from there.*

“Don’t you think it’s a bit strange that a sharp-eyed tradesman like my father went there?”

“Now that you mention it, yes.” *If his goal was to inherit his uncle’s antique store, then Kyoto University is a strange pick. Of course, I do think it’s an amazing achievement.*

“While training to be an appraiser, he also worked hard at his studies. Thanks to his efforts, he was accepted by Kyoto U.”

“That’s...incredible.”

“Indeed. However, that was the strategy he used to be chosen as heir.”

“Strategy?”

“Yes. My father realized that his uncle—in other words, his master—had a very weak academic background. The other apprentices at the time were all extremely talented. They had the traits needed to be tradesmen, and they were all very close in appraisal skills. In order to be chosen out of the many apprentices, my father wanted to have the seal of a Kyoto University graduate as one of the tools in his arsenal. In those days, being a university graduate came with great prestige.”

I nodded silently.

“As my father had hoped, his master went around everywhere bragging that his nephew graduated from the imperial university. The brand power contributed to him being accepted as heir. Later on, my father married my mother—the daughter of a small eatery owner—who was said to be the most beautiful woman in Gion. My father was dazzling at the time, and everyone envied him.”

The owner obtained an academic record, his master’s trade, and a beautiful wife. I can see why everyone envied him.

“Even though my father was such a hard worker, he didn’t like

letting people see how much effort he put in. He wanted everything to look like the result of natural-born talent.”

I think I can understand that too. It was a bluff to make himself look cooler. I can imagine him going, “I didn’t put in no effort!”

“Some people knew that he was working hard behind the scenes, but to others, he looked like a man who got everything without a lick of effort.”

I grimaced at that. *In any era, there are always people who judge a book by its cover.*

“On the night of his wedding, a famous fortune-teller attended the banquet and said to him, ‘Because you have defeated everything in your way and become arrogant, there are many vengeful spirits attached to you, born from grudges and jealousy. However, you are under your ancestors’ powerful protection, so no harm will befall you. The grudges do not disappear, though. Instead, they go to the women who marry into the Yagashira family.’ At the time, my father was furious and sent the man away, saying, ‘Don’t bring such talk to a wedding celebration!’ But the prophecy left a lasting impression on everyone who was there, including my father and mother.”

I gulped. “And then when his wife fell deathly ill, he believed that he was a god of pestilence?” *He thought it’d be better to cut ties with her.*

The manager nodded. “Yes, that’s why he divorced her.”

I was at a loss for words.

“But the story doesn’t end there,” he continued. “Decades later, my wife fell ill as well and passed away. At first, we thought it was just a cold, so we let down our guard. It turned out to be a vicious flu that was going around at the time.”

My heart began to pound with anxiety.

“Do you understand? This is the Yagashira family’s curse. Ever since you and Kiyotaka began your relationship, I’ve been worried that the more serious he became about you, the more he would become afraid of somehow losing you. Then, one day, he would distance himself from you...”

I silently waited for him to continue.

“Kiyotaka broke up with you because of that series of encounters with Ensho, but perhaps an ominous prophecy had appeared in his mind. Even if he didn’t believe it, when a man finds someone he truly loves, he becomes both stronger and weaker. He must’ve been very afraid of what might happen to you.” The manager smiled weakly and sipped his coffee.

The Kiyotaka family’s curse. I’m not the kind of person who believes in that stuff, and I doubt Holmes is either. But when people encounter these scenarios, they think, “What if?” In fact, right now, I feel chills running down my spine out of apprehension.

“Is this why you haven’t remarried?” I asked. The manager had been single ever since his wife had passed away. Maybe he didn’t want a loved one to fall victim to the Yagashira family’s curse again.

At the very least, the owner thinks that way. He loves Yoshie and wants to protect her. Does the manager feel that way about marriage too?

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

“Huh?”

“You’ve got it wrong, Aoi. I want you to listen carefully to what I’m about to say and keep it in mind. The Yagashira family’s real curse is not grudges. It’s words uttered by a shaman.”

“Words rather than grudges?” *What does that mean?* I tilted my head.

“Yes. My parents both claimed to deny the shaman’s words, but on the inside, they ended up fully believing in them. When my mother was bedridden, she thought, ‘I’ve taken on his grudges after all. My time has come.’ After my father divorced her, she was shocked, but she also thought, ‘Now I can be saved.’ Do you know what that means?” There was a sharp glint in his eyes.

“Is it like...autosuggestion?”

“Exactly. According to the shaman, the Yagashira family is surrounded by grudges, but those with the Yagashira blood are under powerful protection and can repel them. As a result, harm will befall their beloved spouses. That kind of thought lingers in your mind. It sinks deeper than you expect until it subconsciously controls your mind and body. When my wife was on her deathbed, she said, ‘I’ll take on the Yagashira family’s curse in its entirety. I won’t let it reach Kiyotaka.’ I was astonished. Even my wife had been affected by the curse of words. She lost to the illness because she wanted to. I was a fool for not realizing earlier. If I’d said from the beginning, ‘That shaman was a fraud,’ things might’ve turned out differently.” A bitter expression came over his face.

“Huh? He was a fraud?”

“That I don’t know. But I believe he was.”

“Why?”

“Shortly after the divorce, my mother recovered from her illness. The following year, she remarried. Her new husband was a wealthy man who ran a real estate business, and apparently, he’d secretly been in love with her for a long time.”

“Oh, I’ve met him before.”

“Ah, right. Some time later, I did some independent research and found that that man was close friends with the shaman, though not publicly.”

“H-Huh?” *She married a man who was close friends with the shaman?*

“Now, I don’t think he hired a shaman to harass my parents at

their wedding party. He isn't that kind of person. I think the shaman did it on impulse. The shaman saw his friend's hidden feelings appear on his face at the beautiful sight of my mother in her white kimono. And then he saw the smug face of my father, who he couldn't tolerate either. It's possible that those two things, along with the alcohol, made him want to find something to condemn my father with. There's no way to confirm whether or not he was a fraud, but either way, he said it on the spur of the moment. And those words became the curse of the Yagashira family. This is called *kotodama*—spiritual power that dwells in words."

A curse that dwells in words... I was too stunned to speak.

"I used to work for a publisher, and now I'm an author. Since my work involves manipulating words, I understand the power and terror that they possess."

"The power and terror that words possess..."

"For example, let's say I tell you, 'Aoi, you are a wonderful girl with a kind heart.' You'd be embarrassed, but you'd try to live up to those words, right? And if a parent tells their child, 'You can't do anything right,' that child really will stop being able to do things right. Both of these phrases are 'curses' that bind and manipulate the recipient, for better or worse. The curse that was unleashed on the Yagashira family was even stronger than that. It invaded the depths of my father's, mother's, and wife's hearts and consumed them."

I felt chills run down my spine. "Were you not bothered by the shaman's words?"

"Not in the slightest," he declared.

"Th-That's amazing." It was also unexpected. The manager had struck me as a more sensitive person. Even I'd been a bit disturbed by the story, and I didn't really believe in that stuff.

"In my case, it's because I can understand how envy would lead the shaman to do that. Maybe he had feelings for my mother as well. He was jealous of my father—frustratingly so—and there was nothing he could do about it. I imagine he wanted to rain on my father's parade for a quick sense of relief, not realizing what a curse those words would become. I'm not as clever as Kiyotaka, so I've lived my life surrounded by talented people. I know what it's like to suffer from envy." He smiled self-deprecatingly.

I didn't know what to say, so I could only make an awkward face.

"I regret not telling Kiyotaka this earlier. I should've, but I thought he was like me and wouldn't let this kind of thing control him. And you were still a young couple, so I thought it was too early." He gave me a weak smile.

The shaman said that harm would befall the women who marry into the Yagashira family, so it's only natural that the manager felt it was too

early.

“I understand,” I said with a small nod.

I don't know if Holmes really was bothered by those words. But I'm sure they did cross his mind at the time, and I think it was one of the factors that hastened his decision. Words can be terrifying.

“I did tell Kiyotaka one thing, though. ‘It’s not grudges that are scary; it’s people. For better or worse, words are curses, so you have to discern the truth from them.’”

“What did Holmes say to that?”

“After a few moments of silence, he bowed and said, ‘Thank you.’ That boy is perceptive. If you tell him one thing, he’ll infer ten other things—or even more. I hope my words were the hint he needed. Come to think of it, that was when he started holing himself up in the Kiyotaka estate, researching,” he murmured, sipping his coffee.

“Manager...” My nose twitched, and my eyes started to tear up.

“I apologize for my son’s rudeness. He did such a tactless thing to the person he loves because it was the only thing he felt he could do. You know, Aoi, I was very sad that I could no longer see you,” he said gently.

I couldn’t hold back my tears anymore, and they spilled forth.

“Thank...you.”

If words are curses, then these words are a warm, gentle, soft, and radiant spell. Spells can bind people, but they can also save them.

I put my hand over my mouth and cried.

Even if I can never go to Kura to see Holmes or the manager again, I’m sure I’ll be grateful for these words for the rest of my life.

Chapter 4: During the Full Moon

1

A few days had passed since the Setsubun Festival.

“It’s not grudges that are scary; it’s people. For better or worse, words are curses, so you have to discern the truth from them.”

The manager’s words sank into my heart more with each passing day.

The truth is hidden within each and every word, even if you tell lies. I’m sure that goes for actions too.

I decided to review everything Ensho had said and done up until now.

First, I went to Nanzen-ji Temple, thinking that it might hold a clue to breaking down the current problem.

I looked at Sanmon gate, which Akihito had been awed by, and the head priest’s residence where Holmes had met Ensho for the first time. I walked along the aqueduct. This temple was where they had had their first confrontation. I hadn’t been present at the time, so I didn’t know exactly what had happened, but I could imagine it based on what I’d heard from Holmes and Akihito.

“Now that I know you’re around, I have a reason to stick around in this world. Anyway, I lost this time, so I’ll be taking my leave. See ya.”

Those had been Ensho’s parting words. From what I’d heard, Ensho hadn’t been able to hide his delight at meeting Holmes. Holmes was the one who had seemed more hostile.

His next encounter with Ensho had been at Genko-an Temple. Both Akihito and I had been present for that one. There, Ensho had given us his background: he’d spent his childhood in Amagasaki with his father, who was a painter. His career as a counterfeiter began when he created paintings that mimicked his father’s style, since his father would take on jobs without doing them.

After telling us about his upbringing, he explained that he felt conflicted because he didn’t know if he wanted Holmes to see through his work or not. Then he closed the folding fan he was holding and thrust it at Holmes’s throat.

“It became clear that I really can’t stand you.”

That time, Ensho had been the one to show hostility. He’d likely been happy during their first meeting, so perhaps he’d been planning to end his little game with the second. But when he’d met Holmes at

Genko-an, he had said, "I can't stand you."

Something about that bothered me.

The third encounter had been at the Yagashira family's New Year's Eve party. The fourth in early spring at Ukon Saito's appraisal competition, then the fifth later in spring, when Ensho stole the Shino tea bowl.

Quite some time had passed before their recent sixth encounter, when Ensho had unexpectedly visited Kura in the autumn. That time, his aura had felt different from hostility. I thought back on it. He had mocked Holmes as usual and brought out a white porcelain incense container, which Holmes had appraised. I'd been too nervous to pay attention to anything else during the appraisal, but thinking about it now, Ensho may have been nervous as well. When Holmes had declared that the piece was real, Ensho had looked bewildered.

But why? Why did he have such a confused look on his face?

I believed that the white porcelain really was authentic. It wasn't a forgery.

What if Ensho was joking when he called it Joseon white porcelain? What if he himself hadn't thought it was real?

In other words, he could've been surprised because while he knew it wasn't a counterfeit, he didn't think it could've possibly been real Joseon white porcelain.

Later on, when Ensho had appeared in front of me, he'd taken out his hostility towards Holmes on me.

Why did he come to me in the first place? He even told Holmes in advance that he was going to. Was it really just to mess with us? Ensho seemed convinced I was Holmes's girlfriend, so maybe he wanted to know what I was like? No, that's not it.

"Truth is, there was something else I wanted to ask Mr. Holmes for that day, not just the appraisal."

He'd said that at the beginning. Wait... I looked up. What if Ensho came to me because he wanted me to pass on the request to Holmes? But since I identified his porcelain as fake, he was surprised, the conversation went off track, and it went downhill from there...

My mind had become a jumbled mess. I pulled my hair in frustration, sighed, and left the aqueduct. A cold wind brushed against my cheeks.

Something was bothering me, but I couldn't put my finger on what. I had a nagging feeling that Ensho's words and actions were hiding something important.

Sundown was very early in the winter.

I still have to study when I get home...

As I was plodding along, my phone rang. *Who could this be?* Every time the phone rang, my pulse quickened. Somewhere in my heart, I was hoping for a call from Holmes—and every time, my hopes were betrayed.

But this time, it was a call from Kura, and my heart leaped.

“H-Hello?”

“Good evening, Aoi. It’s me.”

It was the manager. I couldn’t tell if the sound of his voice eased my anxiety or made it worse. It was complicated.

“Kiyotaka came back from Hyogo today,” he continued.

My breath caught in my throat. Not knowing how to respond, I gave a tentative nod and said, “I-I see.” There were a hundred things I wanted to ask, but the words wouldn’t come out.

“He was looking a little worse for wear, but there was light in his eyes. He seemed determined.”

My hands trembled as I nervously waited for the manager’s next words. I pictured Holmes in the back of my mind.

“When he came into the store, he smiled as soon as we made eye contact. He said, ‘I’ll settle things with Ensho.’”

I felt like I couldn’t breathe.

“It seems he wasn’t planning on telling you because it’s his own problem, but I took the liberty of deciding that you should know...” The manager sounded somewhat apologetic.

I quickly shook my head and said, “No, don’t feel bad. Thank you for telling me.”

I could understand why Holmes didn’t want me to know. He genuinely didn’t want to drag me into his feud with Ensho anymore. But I was really happy to hear that he’d made his decision. Before I knew it, my cheeks were wet with tears. I couldn’t say anything, afraid that I’d let out a sob.

“Are you all right, Aoi?” came the manager’s worried voice.

“I’m okay. Really...thank you so much.”

There was a lot that I wanted to say, but that was all I could muster. I thanked him several more times before hanging up.

I got on the bus, and as soon as I sat down in the back row, I suddenly felt exhausted. I let out a deep breath and leaned back against the seat.

Holmes must’ve found out something in Hyogo. Something about Ensho.

Thinking about it, even though he was determined not to lose to Ensho, he never tried to approach him. The man was like his mirror image, and to Holmes, that meant he was someone to avoid looking at

as much as possible. This was going to be the first time that Holmes challenged him.

Challenge... How is he going to contact him?

The only thing we knew about Ensho was that he was from Amagasaki. Ensho seemed to know everything about Holmes, but as far as I knew, Holmes didn't have any way of looking into his rival.

Did he find information about him in Amagasaki? Or did he leave a message in a place where Ensho would see it?

"Could it be?" I took out my phone and pulled up Kura's website.

Holmes was the administrator of the site, and it was quite clean-looking, with seasonal pictures. Every month, it was updated with information on events happening in Kyoto. But the only information it provided about Kura itself was the store's address and phone number, with the occasional holiday closure announcement.

When the page loaded, I saw the word "Kura" in large text accompanied by a picture of plum flowers. Below that was a message that hadn't been there before:

"Mr. Moria, I have accepted your request. I'll be waiting in the store on the day that Saigyo Hoshi longed for. -Kiyotaka Yagashira"

I gasped. *This is it. He used the website to call out to Ensho. Ensho's request was silent, but Holmes knew what he wanted to say. My heart pounded. He's going to settle things on the day that Saigyo Hoshi longed for...which is indicated by the poem: "Let me die in spring, under the flowers, during the full moon of the second month."*

I remembered what Holmes had said about it: *"The poem is by Saigyo Hoshi. He admired the Buddha so much that he wanted to die during the full moon of the second month—in other words, February 15th, the same day the Buddha died. Unfortunately, he passed away on the sixteenth of that month. He missed it by a hair."*

On that day, Holmes had smiled warmly, surrounded by cherry blossoms. He'd corrected me gently when I'd gotten the poem wrong, but something felt mean about it.

"Holmes, you're kind of mean, huh?" I said with a pout.

"Forgive me, Aoi. Kyoto men are wicked, you see." He lifted his index finger and smiled charmingly.

My chest began to ache, and tears welled up in my eyes again. Holmes...

The day that Saigyo Hoshi longed for varied depending on the lunar calendar, but in this case, it was safe to say that it meant February 15th. The proof was in the holiday closure announcement: *"We will be closed all day on February 15 to organize the store."*

I put my phone in my bag and looked out the window. The moon was beautiful tonight.

Strangely, I had February 15th off as well. If I didn't, I might've given up and gone to school, worrying about Holmes all through class.

No, I'm sure I would've left school early, even if it meant lying to the teacher.

It was 10:30 a.m., and I was on the way to Kura, which usually opened at 11 a.m. Whenever Holmes didn't have school, he'd arrive at 10 a.m. and prepare for opening time by cleaning and whatnot. Even though the store was closed today, I was sure he would be there at the usual time.

I did have my reservations about going to Kura. Holmes is desperately trying to protect me from Ensho, and I feel bad trampling on those feelings. Plus, it could be dangerous. But I want to witness them settling the score.

I felt that strongly about it because I'd realized the truth behind Ensho's emotional outbursts. And I was going to the store before opening time because I wanted to ask Holmes about it directly before Ensho arrived. If he insisted on sending me away, I'd leave without complaining.

It had been a while since I last walked through the Teramachi-Sanjo shopping arcade. I felt sort of happy. My heart beat faster with each step I took.

Even if he kicks me out right away, at least I'll be able to see his face for a second. That's good enough for me.

The antique store came into view. My heart was pounding so hard that it was getting difficult to breathe. I closed my eyes tightly. I was actually extremely scared. But at the same time, I thought, *What if the Saigyo Hoshi riddle was a message to me as well? If Holmes really didn't want me to come, he would've written something that I'd never be able to decipher. Not Saigyo Hoshi's poem about the full moon, which was an important memory for us.*

When I reached the store, I stopped. There was a "Regular Holiday" sign hanging on the door that was almost never there. I took a deep breath, nodded firmly, and turned the doorknob. The chime rang.

Holmes was sitting behind the counter. It was such a normal sight that, for a second, I thought I'd gone back in time.

He looked at me and sighed softly. "So you did come."

His words sounded more resigned than disappointed. He must've expected that I'd come. He looked the same as usual at first glance, but on closer inspection, he seemed to have lost some weight, just as the manager had said.

"S-Sorry. I know it's dangerous, but..." Since I hadn't spoken to him in so long, my voice was shrill from nervousness. Nevertheless, I

looked him straight in the eye and declared, "I want to witness this too." *Like the manager said, I'm sure I deserve this much.*

The silence was starting to scare me, so I lowered my eyes.

Holmes quietly stood up and said, "Yes, I think you have the right to see it. I probably should've told you about today with my own mouth, but I simply couldn't bring myself to do it, because, as you said, there are risks involved. That's why I went about it in a way that you'd be able to figure out."

That poem really did include a message to me.

"Aoi, there are many things I want to talk to you about, including another apology. But I won't say anything right now. I can't."

I nodded silently.

"But...I'm glad you seem to be doing well," he said sadly, looking straight at me.

My chest tightened. "Holmes..." *Oh no, I think I'm going to cry.*

"Aoi, take this." He took something out of his pocket that looked like a small remote control.

"What's this?"

"It's a stun gun for self-defense, which I'll show you how to use right now. I'll protect you at all costs, but just in case, please hold on to this. Also, stay behind the counter—behind *me*—at all times. If something happens, I'll keep Ensho at bay. You will escape through the back door without looking back and run to the police box down the street. I need you to promise me that you'll do that," he said in a firm tone.

There was a serious look in his eyes. The atmosphere was so tense, you could cut it with a knife. We couldn't even bask in our reunion.

Time passed with no conversation between us. Only anxiety drifted through the air. The afternoon went by, and the sun was beginning to set. The store interior was lit by a dim light.

"Is Ensho really going to come?" I murmured.

"Yes, he will. In fact, he's already here," Holmes said, looking up.

The door chime rang and Ensho appeared, wearing a casual kimono with a hat and scarf. I nearly forgot to breathe.

"Evening. You called?" he said with a grin.

"Welcome," Holmes replied, placing his hand on his chest and smiling.

Ensho hung his hat on the clothing pole and glanced behind Holmes, where I was standing. "It's been a while, Aoi. Thanks for the other day. I had fun. Let's go on another date sometime," he said in his usual mocking tone, trying to get a rise out of Holmes.

Normally, Holmes would get angry at this point. But instead, he didn't react. "Please have a seat," he said in a calm tone, sitting down at the counter. It didn't seem like he was going to make coffee for

Ensho.

Well, yeah. He wouldn't go to the kitchenette and leave me here. Sure, it might not be necessary to get anything for Ensho, but he is an invited guest.

I slipped into the kitchenette and started preparing coffee. My heart was pounding furiously. The store usually had jazz music playing in the background, but today it was quiet, so the echoing sound of the coffee brewing felt strange to my ears.

4

"Here you go," I said, placing the coffee cups in front of them.

"Thanks," Ensho said, flashing me a carefree grin. He seemed awfully laid-back.

Holmes, on the other hand, was very quiet—he was the stillness in "stillness and motion." He didn't seem tense or angry, but his aura wasn't gentle or calm either. It was simply *quiet*.

If this is the calm before the storm... I took a few steps back and watched them from behind Holmes.

Ensho also seemed to notice that something was different about Holmes. He pulled back the faint smile that was usually on his face and crossed his arms. "So what was that message about? I never asked you for anything," he said in a slightly amused tone.

Holmes shook his head and said calmly, "No, you came to this store on that day because you had a request for me, right? You ended up leaving without saying it, but I accepted your silent request."

"Oh?" Ensho narrowed his eyes. "What kind of request was it?"

"That day, when you showed me the white porcelain incense container, you wanted to ask me if I'd seen the matching incense burner, correct?" Holmes asked in a quiet yet firm tone. Ensho's face turned serious. "The world of antiques is a web of connections, so you thought I might've seen the matching white porcelain burner before."

Ensho said nothing.

Holmes folded his hands on top of the counter and continued, "That day, you said that the incense container you brought was white porcelain from the Joseon dynasty, but that was only a bluff. You didn't really think it was Joseon white porcelain—you only thought it was a decent work of art, right? Isn't that why you were so surprised when I determined it to be genuine?"

Ensho's eyes widened. Holmes must've been right. I had suspected this too, because Ensho had looked bewildered when it had happened. His confusion at the time hadn't been "Holmes saw through the counterfeit I made" but rather "I can't believe it's actually real."

"Joseon white porcelain incense containers are very rare, so it's

understandable that you were surprised,” Holmes said. “One can find incense containers made of celadon, blue-and-white pottery, or imitation Joseon white porcelain created in a later era, but even for me, that was my first time holding an authentic one in my hands. The appraisal took some time, partially because it was your item and partially because it is so rare.”

Holmes *had* taken quite a long time to perform that appraisal. He must have been wary because it was extremely rare *and* it was Ensho’s. But no matter how long he spent examining it, he would have reached the same conclusion.

“Where did you acquire that incense container?” Holmes asked.

“In Korea, back when I was twentyish. Did a forgery job there, and when I tried to collect the pay, the client went, ‘I don’t have the money right now; I’ll pay when the painting’s sold.’ So I got mad and went, ‘How can I trust that?!’ After I beat him up a little, he went, ‘Fine, you can take any of these products, then,’ and pointed at his collection of counterfeits. I didn’t see the point in taking a fake, but the white porcelain caught my eye. I thought there was a chance, so I took it.”

“I see. It was probably judged to be fake and sold on the black market because the appraiser had never encountered a genuine white porcelain incense container of that shape.”

“Yeah, probably. And like you said, I was shocked when you said it was authentic,” Ensho said, laughing without a hint of shame.

“Did you acquire both the incense container and the incense burner in Korea? This is only an assumption, but you received both of them in one box?”

Ensho said nothing. An incense container was used to hold incense to be burned in a tea room. It wasn’t unusual for one to come with a matching burner. In fact, I remembered Holmes saying that someone had brought a container and burner set to Kura before.

“And then you gave the incense burner to someone,” Holmes continued.

Ensho’s face turned expressionless. It was a face I had seen several times—everyone made that face when Holmes revealed their inner thoughts.

“Somewhere in your heart, you believed they were real. You took very good care of them, didn’t you?”

Ensho didn’t answer, but his colorless complexion made it clear that Holmes was right—he had given his precious white porcelain incense burner to someone else.

“Since you’re such a guarded person, I had to think about what kind of person you would open up to, and the answer I came up with was a childhood friend. You gave the burner to someone you’d been

close friends with since you were a child. At the time, it would've been your most valuable treasure. Since you don't know where it is now, that means it was a parting gift, wasn't it?"

"Agh, enough! Just stop!" Ensho slammed his fist on the counter, clearly not wanting to hear this. He looked like he was about to get up and leave.

"I found it," Holmes said in a clear voice.

"Huh?"

"I went around antique stores in Hyogo looking for it. The old shops were particularly hard to get in touch with because they didn't have websites," Holmes said, putting on his white gloves and pulling out a wooden box from below the counter. He slid it towards Ensho. "Please check it yourself."

Ensho was bewildered, but his curiosity got the better of him and he took the box and opened the lid. Inside was a white porcelain incense burner. It had a smooth and simple form, and the cover had a hole in it. The glossy, pure white vessel's shape was plain at first glance, but it conveyed a sense of immense beauty. It was a wonderful piece.

"Hah!" Ensho laughed dryly, a twisted look on his face.

I knew what he was thinking: the treasure he had given to his precious friend had been sold to an antique shop. When Holmes had appraised the incense container, Ensho must've gotten cold feet. He was afraid to ask if the burner was in circulation because it would be equivalent to asking if his loved one was still holding on to it.

"Well, thanks for taking the trouble to find it. But ya know, Mr. Detective, an unspoken request ain't a real request," Ensho said. His eyes were like sharp blades ready to lash out.

Even though the situation felt like it could blow up at any moment, my heart ached because I realized he was right.

"Quite true. That's why, if it was in an antique shop, I wouldn't have told you about it," Holmes said, his expression unchanging.

Ensho frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Our store often gets customers who have no intention of selling. They only want to find out how much a gift they received from a loved one is worth. Perhaps they're trying to see how strong the sender's feelings were. It was the same for the owner of this incense burner—they asked the antique store for an appraisal only."

Ensho's face stiffened.

"According to the appraiser, when the person found out that this incense burner was authentic, they cried tears of joy. Since it's rare to come across such a treasure at an antique store, the appraiser was disappointed that they couldn't buy it, and that's why they remembered the event so clearly. The appraiser said to the customer,

‘If you ever decide to sell it, please bring it to us,’ and got their name and address. They didn’t give me that information, but they passed on a message for me, and I was able to get in touch. That’s how I was able to find this incense burner and borrow it...from Yuki.”

Ensho’s eyes were wide open.

“Yuki was doing well. There’s a note in the box with their address.”

“Wh-What?” Ensho was visibly upset as he started to stand up.

“U-Um,” I said without thinking. They both looked at me.

“Ensho...you couldn’t tolerate Holmes because of me, right?” I asked quietly.

Holmes’s expression softened slightly, and Ensho smiled self-deprecatingly.

Ensho’s hatred towards Holmes grew stronger because of my presence. I’d been able to figure out that much, at least. That’s why I thought I had to be here for this. And after hearing the truth behind the white porcelain, it felt like I’d found the missing piece of the puzzle. Ensho’s background became clear now:

After living in the underworld for so long, Ensho said farewell to Yuki. He must’ve thought that he wasn’t worthy of the person he loved. He left because he cared. And when he did, he gave away the incense burner—his treasure—as something to remember him by. Ensho had one piece of the set and Yuki had the other. This might’ve been a source of emotional support for him.

Ensho continued to live in the underworld, but various events, including the death of his father, made him sick of everything. He left the world of counterfeiting, but he couldn’t go back to Yuki. It had been years since they’d split up, and he was discouraged because he had dirtied his hands. Wanting to distance himself from the world, he turned to Buddhism.

He entered the priesthood and reflected on his deeds, but somewhere in his heart, he may have felt irritated by that boring, monotonous life. Perhaps his dissatisfaction came to a head when he met Holmes, and everything he’d been bottling up exploded.

After the confrontation at Nanzen-ji Temple, Ensho returned to the outside world. But after some time, he calmed down, thinking, “Why am I trying to repeat my foolish actions?” The fog in his mind remained, though, and he decided to compete with Holmes again, this time in his field of expertise: paintings created with his own doubts and inner conflict. The result was the forgery of *Strayed Sheep*. He surely wanted to end the whole thing there, regardless of whether Holmes saw through the counterfeit or not.

But when Holmes went to Genko-an Temple, he was accompanied by someone who seemed like his girlfriend—me—and that lit a fire in

Ensho's heart. Ensho couldn't return to his beloved, and seeing me sent him into an inexplicable rage. That's why he said, "I really can't stand you." Even though the two of them were like mirror images, Holmes had a friend and a woman accompanying him. It fueled Ensho's pain of not being able to see his loved one, and what we saw was him venting those violent emotions.

Whenever Holmes confronted Ensho, he lost control of himself. It must have been the same for Ensho. He couldn't keep himself together when he was confronted by Holmes.

After leaving, he calmed down again. He may have realized that becoming so angry was a sign that he still wanted Yuki. He couldn't forget. Being aware of Holmes made him reflect on his current situation, and he was disgusted by his regret and envy. He wanted to move on, but the feelings wouldn't fade away. He thought that if he beat Holmes thoroughly and cut all ties, he'd be able to end it. That's why he resorted to stealing the Yagashira family's treasure and setting up a bomb. If he got to see Holmes shamefully running away in fear of the bomb, he'd be satisfied and that would be the end of it. But that didn't happen. Holmes cracked the code and recovered the tea bowl.

After that, Ensho spent some time thinking to himself. If he kept competing with Holmes, they'd be going at it forever. It was probably time to start considering his own happiness. He wanted to see Yuki again, so he decided to ask Holmes about the white porcelain incense burner. There was a chance that someone in the Yagashira family's network would know about it. If the incense burner had been sold, then he would give up on Yuki. But if there wasn't any information about it, then he would trust that Yuki still treasured it. In that case, it might be okay to go visit them.

So Ensho came to Kura—and was shaken by the discovery that his "decent" piece of white porcelain was actually a ridiculous masterpiece. It would sell for a high sum. If Yuki had gotten an appraisal out of curiosity and learned of its worth, they might have been swayed by money. Ensho began to fear that it had long since been sold off. That's why he left the store in such a suspicious way.

When he came to me, it was probably just to poke fun at Holmes and get me to pass his request along. Maybe he didn't want to lose himself by continuing to confront Holmes. But when he talked to me, he must've gotten irritated again and said those nasty things. The emotions he lashed out at me with were...jealousy towards Holmes, a painful inner conflict, and the feeling that he just couldn't take it all anymore.

"Ensho, please take this incense burner and go see Yuki," I urged him. "If you want to see them, then why not? If you want to atone for your crimes, you can do that afterwards, right? You drew a conclusion

from your own judgment, and..."

He's just like Holmes. The two of them really are mirror images. How can they be so similar?

"...that led to even more crimes. Please don't make your loved one sad anymore with your self-centered assumptions." I didn't know what to call this feeling, but as I spoke, my body trembled and tears welled up in my eyes.

"What would you know about it?" Ensho asked in a low voice, scowling at me. His eyes were bloodshot from anger and agitation.

I was scared, but I clenched my fists and looked straight at him. "I do know. After all, why did you become a monk after you quit making forgeries?"

Ensho froze. This was the last thing I'd gotten hung up on: why did he enter the priesthood? Even if he wanted to turn over a new leaf, there was no need to go that far. But now, I finally understood.

"You did it...for Yuki, right? Yuki was so important to you that you didn't want the person they loved to be a sinner, did you?"

Ensho looked down and away.

"It was all for Yuki's sake, wasn't it? If you truly feel that way, that's more than enough. Please go see them." My tears overflowed as I spoke. I couldn't stop shaking.

"Shut up, will you?!" Ensho slammed the counter. "You're so damn annoying." He slumped forward and held his head in his hands. He stayed that way, making no effort to lift his face.

Holmes winced in pain at the sight of him. Ensho's shoulders were trembling. He was desperately trying not to make any sound, but I could tell that he was crying. Before long, his tears fell onto the counter.

The store grew silent aside from Ensho's faint sobs. My heart ached at the sound of them.

5

"Well," Ensho said, pulling his hat down over his bloodshot eyes. He held the cloth-wrapped box containing the incense burner close to him. "Thanks." He walked out the door.

After the chime, the store fell silent. I could hear the ticking hand of the grandfather clock, which usually wasn't audible. The hustle and bustle of people walking outside sounded very far away. No one stopped in front of the store; not with the "Regular Holiday" sign up on the door. Holmes was sitting in front of the counter, while I remained standing.

"U-Um—" I started but was interrupted by the gonging of the grandfather clock. "Um," I tried again.

"I'm completely useless," Holmes muttered as if to interrupt me. He wouldn't look me in the eye, and his face was twisted in sorrow.

"What?"

"I wanted to resolve this incident by myself," he murmured hollowly, his eyes lowered.

Where is he looking?

"But you did, didn't you?" I asked. He had gone all around Hyogo Prefecture trying to investigate Ensho's past. I couldn't even imagine how difficult that must've been.

"No, I believe Ensho only broke because of you. I wouldn't have been able to accomplish it alone. I'm sure he would have run away, leaving the incense burner behind. He and I are similar, so we'll always clash. That's a big reason things got so bad." He sighed.

Since they're so similar, they're incompatible with each other. He might be right. The situation probably only got this complicated because of that.

"I assigned myself this case, so I was going to solve it alone. But in the end, I needed help. I'm such a pathetic man." He smiled self-deprecatingly.

"That's not true."

What is he saying? He struggled all alone and fulfilled Ensho's request. All I did...was give Ensho a small push because he was being stubborn.

"Regardless of the reason, the fact is that I hurt you more than Ensho did. Saying that it was out of concern for you is pure sophistry. I was scared and ran away. This incident showed me just how immature and self-centered I am," he said, grimacing and placing a hand on his forehead.

Even though he'd sorted things out with Ensho, he couldn't just smile and take my hand, saying, "Everything's okay now." He had formally broken up with me, regardless of the reason. But he must have thought that if he could resolve it alone, he might be able to redeem himself.

Holmes looked down and clenched his fists. I imagined he was upset with himself.

You and Ensho really are similar. Were you listening to what I said to him, Holmes? You're doing the same thing he was: drawing a conclusion from your own judgment.

He did hurt me, but he was hurt as well. It must've been just as painful for him.

Would the past me have cried and said, "Don't say that, Holmes"? Or would I have quietly accepted your conclusion and left? The current me is different. I've become a little bit stronger than I was before.

"Isn't this enough?" I said quietly.

Holmes glanced at me, still looking pained.

We hurt each other and suffered. That's fine. Holmes, I learned

something from the manager: the power of words. I learned it from you too. You taught me powerful, magical words. I don't know any words stronger than these.

I took a breath. "Kiyotaka," I said in a deliberately cheerful voice. He looked up in surprise. I smiled and stretched out my arms as wide as I could. "Come here."

His eyes widened.

I don't need any other words. You say that you hurt me, that you're immature and self-centered—but that goes for both of us. It's to be expected. It's fine. Forget your logic and reasoning and come to me.

Holmes stared at me for a while, dumbfounded, before scratching his head and saying, "You're really too much..." He stood up and reached towards me. "Aoi!"

Before I knew it, I was in his arms. He hugged me so tightly that it was hard to breathe.

"Holmes!" I wrapped my hands around his back and cried. I'd missed his warmth so much. His arms, hair, scent—everything had me dizzy with joy.

As long as I have you, I don't need anything else.

Alone in the quiet store, we cried and held each other, each basking in the other's existence.

Epilogue

The short month of February had ended, and now it was March.

"It's already March, huh?" I murmured to myself as I flipped the tabletop calendar to the next page.

Time had really flown by thanks to everything that had happened. The manager and owner were overjoyed to have me back at Kura, which I appreciated a lot.

"Oh, thank the gods you're back," the owner had said, teary-eyed with his hands on my shoulders. He'd secretly been worried about me.

"We've been waiting for you," the manager had added, smiling gently.

I'd wanted to come back to Kura as if nothing had happened, but when I saw them so openly happy for me, I couldn't help but cry from joy too.

And it wasn't only the owner who'd been worried about me. Even though I had entrance exams coming up, my mother had been concerned because I'd suddenly stopped going to Kura.

"I don't know if something happened, but I'm glad you can go to Kura again," she'd said.

She'd pretended not to know anything and didn't pry further, but it made me realize that she'd been looking out for me, ready to help at any time. Knowing that I was surrounded by these wonderful adults made my heart well up with emotion.

Entrance exams had come and gone. All of my hard work had paid off—I was accepted at Kyoto Prefectural University and made my parents proud. After that, I'd gone back to working part-time, and now everything was back to normal.

I glanced at Holmes, who was doing the accounting at the counter. He noticed my gaze, looked up, and smiled warmly. My heart skipped a beat, and I choked up.

"Aoi, would you like to take a break? I'll make coffee."

"Oh, yes, I'd appreciate that."

I was so happy that things were back to normal that every little thing made me tear up.

After a short while, two cups were placed on the counter. Both Holmes and I were drinking our coffee black.

I took a sip and let out a breath. "It's delicious."

It really was peaceful these days, as if all of the drama had been a fever dream.

I wonder what Ensho's doing now? We haven't heard from him since

that fateful day, I thought as I peered into my cup.

The door chime rang and a deliveryman came into the shop, carrying a package with both hands. Judging from the size and shape, it was probably a moderately large painting.

“Excuse me, I have a delivery for you,” he said.

“Thank you,” Holmes answered, signing the slip and accepting the package.

“Any time,” came the reply as the deliveryman left the store.

As the door chime rang, I peeked at the delivery slip. The package was indeed a painting, and the sender was someone named Shinya Sugawara. The recipient was Kiyotaka Yagashira.

“Did you order a painting, Holmes?” I asked.

“No.”

Holmes frowned and carefully opened the box. Both of us froze when we saw the painting that came out. It depicted what seemed like a streetscape in China. There was a canal in the middle, flanked on both sides by rows of exotic houses with strings of red lanterns hanging from their eaves. The surface of the water glistened in the bright sunlight. A long houseboat, the kind used for hosting parties, was anchored on one side of the canal, and farther in the distance, a very small boat was about to pass under a stone bridge. There were beautiful peach blossoms among the greenery of the trees, and upon closer inspection, the scenery in the foreground depicted daytime and the background was at night. Even though the water in the foreground reflected sunlight, there was a white moon floating in the water in the background.

I was so awed by the painting’s brilliance that I almost couldn’t breathe. The moment I set eyes on it, it was as if I’d been pulled into the scene. It was fantastical and not photorealistic at all, yet it felt *alive*. I could hear the lively crowds, and it seemed like the boat could cast off at any moment. I looked at Holmes and saw that he too was overwhelmed by it.

After some time, he murmured, “This is a landscape painting of Suzhou.”

“Suzhou... So it is a Chinese landscape.”

“Yes, this would’ve been painted with the year 826 CE in mind.”

“826 CE?” I looked up at him, surprised. “How do you know that?”

“I believe this is a recreation of a poem by Juyi Bai.”

Since I’d studied Chinese poetry for my entrance exams, I knew the name. His courtesy name was Letian, and in Japanese, we often called him Rakuten Haku. That was the extent of my knowledge, though. I wouldn’t be able to identify a Juyi Bai poem from this painting.

“What’s the poem called?” I asked.

“*Little Boat*,” he answered quietly without looking away from the painting.

A little boat, newly built

With a thatched roof over light support beams

From deep into town to the quiet shore, now I can go anywhere

Shallow waters, low bridges, I can pass through anywhere

Paddling in the shade of yellow willows, the moon’s reflection follows me

Drifting, as the wind strikes me with the scent of white duckweed

I slowly pull the boat to a stop under a blooming cherry tree

And wonder which house has the reddest flowers I can see

“Juyi Bai, otherwise known as Rakuten Haku, was appointed Governor of Suzhou in the second year of the Baoli era; that is, 826 CE. Suzhou is a beautiful city known as the Venice of the East because of the waterways running through it. That was when he wrote the poem *Little Boat*.”

As I listened to him, I looked back at the mystical landscape painting that captured a day in Suzhou. It matched the poem perfectly. I could sense Rakuten Haku’s excitement upon traveling to a new and beautiful place, thinking, “Now I can go anywhere.” There was so much freedom and thrill in this brilliant piece.

“I wonder if it was painted by the sender, Shinya Sugawara,” I said. I didn’t know how popular that artist was, but he was incredibly talented.

“That’s Ensho’s real name.” Holmes turned to me and smiled.

“Huh?”

“When I met with Yuki in Amagasaki, I asked what Ensho’s real name was, and it’s Shinya Sugawara. Judging from this painting, he broke free from the past and is now in a new world.”

I gave a silent nod. *Released from the spell that bound him to the past, he became free and is now excitedly looking to the future. This painting represents those feelings, and he must’ve sent it to Holmes as a symbol of gratitude.*

I was touched, and beside me, Holmes was stroking his chin. *Is he moved?* I wondered. I turned to look at him happily only to see that his eyes were cold, as if he were horrified.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Holmes?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Sorry, please don’t look at my face right now.” He hurriedly turned away.

“Why not?”

“I’m...frustrated and jealous. When I look at this painting, I can’t help but panic in the face of his talent. I don’t want you to see me like this.” Still looking away, he continued quietly, “It makes me

wish...that I had this much talent too.” His voice trembled a little.

As someone who truly loved art, Holmes respected creators very much. He may have been admiring them more than I’d imagined. And he must’ve been desperately envious of those who could create works of beauty. I stood there, unable to say anything. Holmes straightened his back and slowly turned around. His face was very gentle.

“Sorry,” he said.

I shook my head and replied, “It’s okay.” I looked up at him.

“Holmes, I’m sure that jealousy is a sign of potential.”

“Huh?”

“When I look at this beautiful painting, I’m moved, but I’m not jealous. That’s because I don’t think there’s the slightest chance that I’ll ever be able to paint something this amazing. I think that when you’re jealous of something, it’s proof that you have the potential to do it. It’s kind of embarrassing to admit, but sometimes I’m jealous of your eye for appraisal.”

“Aoi...” He looked at me, seeming slightly surprised.

“I’m sure you have the talent for creation, Holmes. That’s why you feel the way you do.”

His face relaxed. “Thank you. You might be right. As you said, when you’re touched by someone’s talent and it’s completely out of your field, you can let go and appreciate it, but if it’s something that you have the potential to accomplish too, it could result in envy. My jealousy exists because I have the tiniest potential. However, I am the same as my father.”

“The manager? How so?”

“My father admired and was jealous of my grandfather’s appraisal skills, but he took the path of an author instead. It was probably because he understood from experience that, while he had potential, he’d never be able to reach *that* level. So he ran away without bothering to put in the effort. I’m the same way. Ensho probably spent his childhood desperately painting in order to survive, and the talent we see here is the fruit of that effort. It’s naive of me to simply look at his painting and be jealous even though I never put in as much work as he did,” he said in a calm tone, picking up the painting. “My heart burns with frustration and envy, but on the other hand, I’m very happy to receive such a beautiful piece. I’m also happy that Ensho’s heart was set free,” he continued, now speaking passionately.

I nodded.

His heart burns with jealousy, but it also dances with joy. Both of those are his true feelings, and I’m really glad that he told me.

“We may as well put it up,” he said, hanging Ensho’s painting on the wall in the Chinese antiques section. It fit perfectly, as if it had been made for that space. It made me think that Ensho had even

predicted where the painting would be placed.

We stood next to each other, looking at it. My heart was again struck by its brilliance.

"I wonder if Ensho managed to visit his girlfriend," I murmured. Holmes shrugged weakly. "Aoi..."

"Yes?"

"I wasn't sure if I should tell you, but I think it'll be problematic if you continue to misunderstand, so let me make this clear," he said, looking straight into my eyes.

My heart skipped a beat. "Wh-What is it?"

"Yuki is not a woman. He's a man," he said bluntly.

"A man?"

"Yes. Which means he's not Ensho's 'girlfriend.'"

"H-Huh?" I squeaked. "So, um, that means he's his boyfriend, then?" The revelation had my heart pounding. *How could this be? I was totally imagining Ensho saying a tearful farewell to the woman of his dreams. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Nothing is straightforward when it comes to Ensho. Who would've thought that he had a boyfriend?*

As I gaped in shock, Holmes chuckled and said, "No, I don't think that's quite right. It's not a matter of man or woman. Yuki was the most important person in Ensho's life; that's all."

The serious look in his eyes told me that this wasn't going to be a lighthearted conversation. I straightened up and asked, "What do you mean?"

"The Yuki I met was a very slim and attractive twenty-five-year-old man. He and Ensho used to live in the same apartment building. Ensho took care of him like a younger brother since they were six years apart...like Rikyu and me, including the age difference."

Similar to Holmes and Rikyu... That makes it easy to imagine. It's incredible...Ensho and Holmes even have that in common.

"Ensho's father was a violent drunk, while Yuki lived with a single mother who neglected him. It was common for Yuki's mother to not even cook meals for him, so Ensho would bring him food out of concern. Whenever Yuki was bullied by the neighborhood children, Ensho would always come to his rescue. Since they both lived in unfortunate households, they stuck together and supported each other. From what I heard, it felt as though protecting Yuki was how Ensho kept himself going."

By protecting someone, he maintained his sense of self. How beautiful...yet sad.

"When Yuki entered high school, Ensho's father was hospitalized, and Ensho had to leave his home. When he left, he gave Yuki the white porcelain incense burner and said, 'If you're ever strapped for cash, sell this.' Yuki said he could never bring himself to do it."

“I see...”

At the time, Ensho must've truly wanted Yuki to sell it if he ever needed to, but I felt like I could understand why Yuki never had. Even though Ensho wanted him to sell it in an emergency, deep in his heart, he must've also not wanted him to.

“After Ensho moved out, Yuki never saw him again. But every month, Ensho would send him money as an allowance.”

“Huh? Ensho sent Yuki an allowance?”

“Yes. Yuki said that he was able to graduate from university thanks to that. He'd been reluctant to accept the money, but there was always a letter included that said, ‘I'll come see you when you graduate from university, so work hard on your studies.’ So Yuki studied hard, believing that Ensho would visit him when he graduated. But even after graduating and finding a job, Ensho never came...presumably because he had washed his hands of the counterfeiting business when Yuki graduated.”

“Oh!”

So Ensho was making counterfeits for Yuki's sake. After Yuki graduated and found a job, Ensho quit and became a monk. He must've cared about Yuki a lot to protect him for so long.

Before I knew it, tears were flowing from my eyes.

“Aoi...” Holmes reached out and wiped them away with his finger.

Ensho had been sacrificing himself for his whole life. Then, he'd met Holmes, and for the first time, he'd exploded. He was a very pure person—that was why he'd become a monk. I didn't know how he'd gotten into the temple, but for someone like him, forging documents would've been a piece of cake. Perhaps the priests had even known everything when they'd accepted him.

“Like you said, it's not a matter of man or woman,” I said. “Ensho cared about him. I'm embarrassed that I even made that clichéd assumption. His love was so beautiful, delicate, and pure.” I lowered my head in shame.

Holmes chuckled. “When I visited, their relationship was beautiful, delicate, and platonic, but we don't know how it might've changed when Ensho went to see him. It's undeniable that they were strongly drawn to each other. If they're happy, that's all that matters, isn't it?” he said as he walked towards the counter.

I nodded. “You're right.”

I hope he finds happiness. He's something like Holmes's counterpart, after all.

We sat down at the counter again and sipped our coffee, which was now cold.

“Should I rebrew it?” Holmes asked.

“No, it's okay. Good coffee is still delicious even when it's cold.”

“You’ve gotten comfortable drinking it black, I see.”

“Yes.” I nodded.

Holmes looked at the calendar on the counter and smiled gently.

“As you were saying earlier, it’s already March.”

“Yes.”

“March is a memorable month for me.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t you know? Two years ago, in March, a certain girl came to this shop with hanging scrolls from her house.”

I blushed.

“And she cried her eyes out here,” he continued.

“S-Stop that, Holmes.” I put my hands on the counter.

“In a short period of time, that girl grew into an amazing woman and took my heart prisoner.” He gently entwined his fingers with mine.

“H-Holmes...”

Now I was feeling a different kind of embarrassment. I could feel my blush reaching my ears.

“Call me Kiyotaka again, Aoi.” He smiled and squeezed my hand. It was so enticing that I couldn’t look him in the eye.

“I-I can’t. We’re in the middle of work.”

“It’s just saying my name. What are you imagining?” He grinned mischievously.

“I’m not imagining anything! Jeez, you really are wicked...Kiyotaka,” I said hesitantly.

This time it was Holmes who blushed and looked away. “This is so dangerous,” he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent. “I could run a marathon after hearing you say my name.”

“Oh, stop that!”

We both sat there, cheeks flushed, unable to make eye contact.

Suddenly, the door was flung open, ringing the chime.

“Heeey! Here I am, Holmes! Did you miss me?” Akihito came in with a wide grin on his face. Holmes and I quickly let go of each other’s hands.

It had been a long time since I’d last seen Akihito. He’d been getting more TV work lately, and from my perspective, he seemed extremely busy.

Akihito looked at me, then Holmes. “What? Didn’t you guys break up?” he asked, confused.

“Huh?” Holmes and I replied in unison.

“Uh, the owner called me last month, and he was all, ‘Kiyotaka’s depressed as heck because Aoi dumped him, so come over and cheer him up.’ But it was right before I was about to leave for an overseas shoot, so even though I was worried, I couldn’t do anything before

going to Las Vegas. I forgot all about Holmes and had the time of my life, though.”

Holmes and I exchanged glances.

Oh, so the owner contacted Akihito. Since I stopped coming to the store and Holmes was depressed, it makes sense that he got the wrong idea about what happened. He must've thought Akihito, an extraverted bundle of energy, would be able to blow away the heavy mood descending over the Yagashira family. I giggled. *It's just like him to come up with that idea.*

Holmes shrugged, seeming ashamed of himself.

“But hey, you made up? Man, I even bought you chocolate to cheer you up,” Akihito said, plopping himself down in the seat next to me. He placed an expensive box of chocolate on the counter.

“Why would you give him chocolate to cheer him up?” I asked, tilting my head.

“Well...” He folded his hands behind his head. “I also heard from the owner that Holmes’s birthday is on Valentine’s Day, of all days. So, it’s kinda late, but I bought this as a birthday present and a Valentine’s Day gift. Aren’t I such a nice guy?”

“Oh!” I put my hand over my mouth. “That’s right. Holmes’s birthday was on Valentine’s Day.”

“Wait, what? You forgot your boyfriend’s birthday, Aoi?”

“I’m so ashamed of myself.”

This was so embarrassing. Because of everything that had happened, I’d completely forgotten about it.

“It’s fine, Aoi,” said Holmes, smiling. “You gave me very wonderful words.”

He must’ve been referring to what I’d said on the fifteenth. I blushed.

“Look at this economical guy, getting a full stomach from words,” Akihito quipped.

“They’re Aoi’s words, after all.”

“Yeah, okay, miss me with that lovey-dovey stuff. Man, I seriously thought Aoi finally got sick of your weirdness and broke up with you.”

“Did you, now?” Holmes asked with a laugh.

“What else was I supposed to think? I did try to help you out, you know? The best way to forget a woman is with another woman, so I asked around. So, sorry if a great woman randomly shows up at the store one day, Aoi.” He raised a hand towards me, not seeming to feel the slightest bit guilty.

“Akihito...” I facepalmed. This guy never changed.

I thought for sure that Holmes would’ve been annoyed too, but instead he laughed and declared, “Akihito, in my eyes, there’s no greater woman than Aoi.”

I almost stopped breathing.

“Ohhh, not bad. I bet getting dumped and then accepted again really put you in your place.” He leaned forward and grinned in amusement. He was convinced that I’d dumped Holmes and we’d gotten back together.

“You’re right,” Holmes replied with a gentle smile. “I’m sure I’ll be indebted to her forever.”

“Forever?” Akihito’s eyes snapped open.

I was too happy and embarrassed to look up at this point. I didn’t know what the future would hold, but I was truly glad that he’d said that. *I hope we can continue to walk together in life...*

I lifted my head and saw Holmes looking at me. We unconsciously gazed into each other’s eyes.

“Hey, you guys already *did it*, right?” Akihito asked with a straight face, resting his chin in his hand.

“Huh?” We both turned around at the same time.

“You seem waaay closer than before. Yeah, you’ve gotta be doing it.” He grinned mischievously.

Crude as ever.

“I’m right, right? Took you long enough, Holmes. When was it? After you made up?”

Akihito leaned even closer, and Holmes flicked him on the forehead.

“Ow!”

“You really don’t know how to show restraint,” Holmes said. Then he looked at me, held up his index finger, and asked, “Right?”

I giggled and nodded. “Yes, you’re right.”

“Man, you’re no fun.” Akihito pouted, crossing his arms.

The door chime rang again.

“Welcome,” we said, turning to see a very unusual guest. It was Yanagihara, an appraiser and old friend of the owner’s. You could say they were rivals. I’d met him at parties before, but this was my first time seeing him at Kura.

“Why, if it isn’t Yanagihara. My grandfather is in Osaka right now,” Holmes said apologetically, standing up.

“Nah,” the appraiser said, shaking his head, “I’m not here for that old geezer. I came to thank you, Kiyotaka.”

“Me?” Holmes tilted his head slightly, unsure of what he’d done to deserve thanks.

“Thank you for helping my apprentice,” Yanagihara said, bowing.

“Your apprentice?” Holmes frowned.

“Couldn’t have done it without you,” called out an unexpected voice. Ensho stepped into the store.

We all gasped. Even Akihito was gaping in shock. Ensho was wearing his usual casual kimono, and he had a confident smile on his

face. Holmes twitched, perhaps from a bad premonition.

I guess he still gets irritated when he sees Ensho.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he asked in a low voice.

Yanagihara laughed happily and said, “This fellow visited me the other day and told me everything that happened. He asked me to make him my apprentice, and I was going to refuse, but then he said, ‘My eyes are just as good as that Holmes of Kyoto,’ and I got a little excited—okay, I was moved. Anyway, we can never have too many excellent connoisseurs. Of course, I’m only going to mentor him after he’s turned himself in and atoned for his crimes. It’s because of you that I got a brilliant apprentice of my own, so I came to thank you. Oh, right, it’s late, but I got you a birthday present. Here, it’s chocolate.”

He held out a box. Holmes accepted it with a conflicted expression.

“Thank you.”

Ensho took a folding fan out of his pocket and hid his mouth behind it as he laughed. “Well, we’re in the same boat now. Counterfeits are unacceptable, so let’s do the best we can, *Mr. Holmes*,” he said challengingly, bringing his face close to his rival’s.

I’m sure he wanted to thank Holmes properly too, but once he saw him, he just had to take on that attitude. Seriously, these two are ridiculously skilled, but when it comes to this relationship, they’re completely inept.

“All right, young’uns, you’re going to have to work hard to make the art industry more exciting.” Yanagihara gave Holmes and Ensho each a cheerful smack on the back.

Ensho was smiling too, but Holmes’s expression remained cold.

“What, am I not welcome?” Ensho asked with upturned eyes, closing his fan and putting a hand on his chin.

Holmes gave a small sigh and said, “I do welcome you. It’s reassuring to have a talented person like you come around to our side. However, I still haven’t forgiven you for what you did to Aoi, and I don’t intend to lose to you either.” There was a confident look in his eyes.

Ensho smiled happily. “That’s good. Life’ll be fun if I can compete with you.”

Holmes faintly smiled back. He must have felt the same way.

“Well then, see you next time, Kiyotaka,” said Yanagihara. “Let’s go, Ensho.”

“Right,” the younger man replied, bowing and following his new master out of the store. He took a split second to glance at his painting on the wall before immediately turning on his heel as if to hide any signs of weakness or embarrassment. He must have been happy.

He may have buried his whole past by painting that. And in his mind, he must've already abandoned his original name. He still seems like the "Ensho" we know. Suddenly, I felt nervous. Did Ensho go see Yuki like he was supposed to?

"U-Um, please give Yuki our regards," I said to his retreating back.

Ensho turned around and smiled. It was a calm, happy smile, and it told me everything I needed to know. He had reunited with Yuki. And for Yuki's sake, he'd resolved to atone for his sins and become an appraiser.

Thank goodness, I thought, deeply moved.

Immediately after Yanagihara and Ensho left, a middle-aged man in a suit entered the store.

"Hey there, kiddos."

There are so many guests today. This tends to happen at Kura—people all come at once.

This was Katsuya Komatsu, a private detective we'd gotten to know after various incidents.

"Why, if it isn't Komatsu," Holmes said. "Good to see you." He looked at the man from top to bottom and smiled.

"Oh!" Akihito exclaimed, "Hey there, Komatsu. Haven't seen you since Aoi's birthday party."

The detective gave a slight bow. "My daughter's been a huge fan of yours ever since that party. She says you're good-looking and funny. I can see why you're rising in popularity."

"Thanks. You're also famous now, huh? You're the brilliant detective who solved the cannabis cult case that involved a politician and a top-tier prep school."

"No, I really didn't do much." Komatsu awkwardly scratched his head. Since he'd been credited for the cannabis cult case, he'd seen an explosion of requests and was now doing quite well for himself.

Akihito glanced at Holmes. "So it really was Holmes who solved the case, huh?"

"Yeah, that's how it is." Komatsu shrugged.

"No, not at all," Holmes said smoothly, shaking his head.

Akihito was right; Holmes had done most of the work on that case. He didn't want it to be publicly known, though, so he'd had Komatsu take the credit.

"Setting that aside, I notice you're wearing a proper suit today instead of a worn-out one, Komatsu," said Holmes. "You look cleaner overall, your skin is clear, and you seem healthier. Did you remarry, by any chance?"

"Y-You're as scary as ever," Komatsu said, recoiling slightly.

"Wait, you remarried? Congratulations!" My eyes lit up.

“No, no. I just started living with Masami and Yuko; I haven’t remarried. Masami hasn’t made up her mind yet, so marriage will have to wait. Anyway, I came today because I have something to ask you guys.”

“What is it?”

“Well...” A man entered the store behind him. “This is my client,” Komatsu said hesitantly.

Holmes frowned. “Why did you bring him to me?”

“Wait, I’m not asking you to do any detective work,” Komatsu said hurriedly. “This is an appraisal.”

Holmes immediately relaxed and smiled. “Ah, I see, my apologies. Appraisal requests are always welcome. For a second there, I misunderstood and thought you’d come to push another troublesome case onto me. May I trust that such a thing will never happen again?”

“Hey, you’re not the boss of me.” Komatsu laughed dryly and turned to look at the person standing behind him.

The man bowed. “Hello, my name is Saotome. I’d like you to take a look at my late grandfather’s mysterious artifact.”

“A mysterious artifact?” Holmes looked intrigued. “Of course, please have a seat.” He gestured towards a chair in front of the counter.

He must be excited to see what kind of item it is.

“Thank you,” the man said hesitantly. “I’ve heard that you’re very sharp, which is why people call you the ‘Holmes of Kyoto.’”

“Not at all.” Holmes put his hand on his chest and smiled elegantly. “I’m only called Holmes because my surname is Yagashira.”

You’re still saying that? I giggled.

The storm had passed, and a door to a new future had opened. It was a bright afternoon.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. *Holmes of Kyoto* has reached volume seven! I think that's incredible. It's all thanks to everyone who supported the series.

This volume feels like a conclusion, but it's not a total conclusion—it's the conclusion of the high school arc. I have a vision for where the story will go after this, vague as that may be, and fortunately, my editor has encouraged me to keep going. So, the pace might slow down, but I'd like to continue writing this series. The cast is taking on new roles. Aoi will become a university student, Kiyotaka will have completed graduate school, Akihito will be the same as always, and the nature of Ensho's involvement will change—and I hope you'll watch their antics fondly.

Also, I'd like to thank the confectionery Matsuya Tobei, who graciously allowed me to research them for this book. They also taught me in detail about tea ceremonies, which I'm sincerely grateful for.

I'd also like to give a heartfelt thanks to my younger cousin and close friend who lives in Prague. She taught me about Alphonse Maria Mucha.

Additionally, a guidebook has been put together for *Holmes of Kyoto*. It's called *Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 7.5*. It includes a summary of the shrines and temples visited in the series so far, a short story around seventy pages long, several very short, fun stories, 4-koma manga strips by Shizu Yamauchi and myself, and a section where the characters and author answer questions sent in by the readers.

The guidebook is called "Volume 6.5" because the main short story takes place in between volume 6 and volume 7. Volume 6 ends with Kiyotaka and Aoi heading to Aoi's birthday party at the Kiyotaka residence, and volume 6.5 covers the party itself. All sorts of familiar faces are invited, and as is customary, they play a mystery-solving game. It's a very happy and peaceful side story, fitting for a guidebook. So, it might be better to read volume 6.5 before volume 7, but any order is fine.

Next, I have some sad news. This series has mentioned cream-filled red bean buns on a few occasions, but it appears the cafe that sold them closed down on December 24, 2016. They were delicious, and I loved them very much. I hope they return one day.

Lastly, please allow me to use this space to express my thanks:

To Futabasha, EVERYSTAR, the proofreaders, the distributors, the bookstores, Mr. and Mrs. Akemi, who supervised the Kyoto accent, Shizu Yamauchi, who drew yet another splendid cover, the cover designer, and of course you for picking up this book.

I'm truly thankful to all of the connections surrounding myself and this series.

Thank you all so much.

Mai Mochizuki

Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading volume 7 of *Holmes of Kyoto*! This was probably the most straightforward volume to translate so far, but as is typical for this series, there's always something to elaborate on.

First off, the chapter 1 title “The Heart of the Matter.” The original title in Japanese was *sono kokoro wa*, or “the heart is.” This is a phrase commonly used in Japanese wordplay riddles, which follow the format of “What ‘heart’ do [item A] and [item B] have in common?” where the answer is a pair of homophones. For example:

Q: What “heart” do glass and a NEET have in common?

A: They're both *mushoku* (colorless / jobless).

Obviously the word “heart” isn't really used this way in English, but since the title had to stay heart-related because of the chapter content, I opted for a relevant heart idiom.

The other topic I'd like to talk about is the *kotodama* (spiritual power of words) brought up in chapter 3. For the sake of conversation flow, I had to keep the gloss brief, but this is actually a prominent concept in Japanese culture that can be found in everything from mythology to martial arts to weddings. The belief is that words and sounds contain spiritual power that can influence the environment, body, and soul. The manager gives positive and negative examples of *kotodama*, but here are some other real-world applications of the concept:

- At weddings, people avoid saying any separation-related words, such as “cut,” “break,” or “end.” For example, they can't say “the wedding ceremony ended”—instead, they say “the wedding ceremony opened.” Instead of saying “cut the cake,” they say “put the knife in the cake,” and so on.
- *Kiai*, the shout performed in martial arts while attacking (think “hi-yah!”), also has its roots in *kotodama*. Part of it is for focusing energy into the strike, while part of it is to intimidate the opponent.
- For students taking entrance exams, failing an exam is called “falling,” so words such as “tumble” and “slip” shouldn't be used either.



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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 7

by Mai Mochizuki

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